SYBILLA

*

MRS G. LINNÆUS BANKS

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SYBILLA,

AND OTHER STORIES.

BY

MRS G. LINNÆUS BANKS,

AUTHOR OF "GOD'S PROVIDENCE HOUSE," "THE MANCHESTER MAN," "GLORY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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BESSY AND OTHERS:

LEAVES FROM A LIFE HISTORY.

CHAPTER III.

CHANGES.

THE letter which gave Bessy such an unpleasant surprise was from Sarah, expressing her intention to follow her sister's lead and go into service.

"I'm not going to stay here and work from morning to night, and never have a day to one's self to go pleasuring, like other girls" (so the letter ran), "or to have Reu-

ben or Jim after me if I don't get home to the minute. The house isn't like the same since you went, what with father's goings on, and Reuben ordering about as if he was master. And mother has grown so cross and so strict, one might as well be in a nunnery; and I'm not going to stand it. She says I waste too much time before the looking-glass, and think too much of setting myself off; and if I look at any of the lads in church it's a crime. It isn't my fault that Jack Miles or Sam Perks wants to walk home with me, and hang about our lane; or that the young squire has spoken to me and called me a pretty lass; yet there's been such a hubbub about it as never was; and I just believe Aunt Hales is at the bottom of it. Father threatened to horsewhip me, but he'd best not try it. As for Reuben, he's so set upon having Emma White in the house to help mother, that I can do nothing to please him. But if she comes here with her quiet, sneaking ways, I shall leave, whether they like it or not. Jim told me last night that Tom

Ashtead had been asking after you, and wanted to know where you were living, but he hadn't a mind to tell him, the whole lot of them were getting so uppish since they had that bit of money left them by their grandfather's sister. And I asked Jim how he came across Tom Ashtead, for he never shows his face here, but Jim put me off. It's in my mind that Jim's hankering after their Matty—like a great donkey—for she just turns up her nose at him and all of us, as if we was not fit to wipe her shoes. Mother sends her love, and hopes you are comfortable. There's father coming up the lane hooting and swearing, so no more at present from your affectionate sister, SARAH BIRCH.

"*P.S.*—Be sure and let me know if you hear of a nice place, for I'm sure I sha'n't stay here to be badgered. And don't be surprised if I was to drop on you suddenly some day."

Bessy folded up her letter and put it in her pocket, looking very grave indeed.

She knew sufficient of both her mother and sister to feel assured that the former was not cross without a cause, if cross at all; and the whole tone of the letter indicated that Sarah herself was giving her family cause for uneasiness. "Reuben and Jem would not leave the farm to look after her for nothing," thought Bessy, as she went about her morning's work quieter than usual. "It will be a good thing for mother if Emma White does come to help her; she's a steady, good girl, and she can be well spared from her own home. Father would surely behave better before her. But I hope Sarah won't come here. Mrs Price would be displeased. It might do Sarah no harm to go to service for awhile. She would have less her own way than she thinks, and the lesson might do her good."

She, however, wrote home to her sister that very night to give her a word or two of counsel, and advise her to stay at home and obey her mother, saying that strangers would be much more strict than anyone at home, and that she might thank her

brothers for looking after her instead of showing temper. As for the young squire, she cautioned her to keep out of his way; *his* notice was not to a young woman's credit. And she added that Mrs Price did not permit her servants to have visitors, and she did not know anywhere she could possibly meet her unless at the shop of the confectioner Mrs Price dealt with.

She did not trust herself to say a word about Tom, not having much faith in her sister's discretion. Indeed, the more she reflected, the more was she convinced that for her own peace of mind, and his too, it was best she preserved silence. "If they have grown richer, and we are being dragged down in the world, the Ashteads are not likely to be better inclined towards me; and if Tom thought more of his family than of me when we were more on a level, it's not likely he has changed by this time. But if he has, I'm not going into any family on sufferance, or to be a disgrace to it. And neither Matty nor Aunt Hales shall have a chance of saying I'm seeking Tom

or sending messages to him. We've parted —and there's an end of it."

It was all very well for her to tell herself "there was an end of it," and she "would not think about him;" the wonder why he wanted to know where she lived would obtrude in the very midst of her work, and of that, fortunately for her, there was more than usual.

There was a thorough turn-out—a repetition of the autumn cleaning—before Christmas. Undreamed of stores of glass, and china and plate, were brought out to be washed and polished; furniture paste and friction were in demand for chairs and tables, oil and rottenstone for the fire-irons, blacklead and brush for the grates, and Mrs Price's "very particular" rang in Bessy's ears from morning until night.

The said lady had a pet theory respecting the last item of housework, insisting that Bessy did not use sufficient blacklead; she was not using half as much as her predecessors; she could not bring her stoves to a polish without it, and so on, and so on.

Bessy had found the moulded ironwork of the grates clogged and caked, and had done her best to remedy the ill; but the clever housewife regarded the unused packets of powder as evidence of laziness, not economy, and insisted on its use.

"Very well, ma'am," said Bessy composedly; and at the end of the week the blacklead had disappeared.

"Ah," said Mrs Price triumphantly; "look at that grate! That's something like a polish! I knew you were trying to save your labour, not the blacklead. As if I did not know how a grate should be polished. And I told you before how very particular I was."

There was a faint intimation of a smile on Bessy's face as she carried off her pot and brushes, conscious that not an atom of fresh blacklead had gone on the grate that morning, a brisk dry brushing having been the charm under which it had brightened.

"And see you put plenty of soda in the water before you clean the paint," had been the "particular" injunction.

"It would serve her right if I did," murmured Bessy to herself; "but the paint is the landlord's, and I should feel as if I was robbing him, if I washed the paint away with soda; I can take the dirt off without it."

And she did, and Mrs Price rejoiced in the efficacy of her instruction.

So much cleaning, as Ann foretold, heralded company; not merely a family gathering on Christmas Day, but a dance, for which a carpet had to be removed and rolled up; and after this came card and supper parties at intervals. And for all these there was extra cookery, extra preparations, although most of the confectionery came from Mrs Amory's, at the foot of the hill. But no one was hired to wash dishes, or wait at table; and although Mrs Price would reach napery, china, glass, plate, and stores from the closets, and assisted to arrange the collation on the night of the dance, Ann could render little assistance unless Miss Clara was in a good humour and could be coaxed into taking

charge of the nursery for half-an-hour; but there was so much dressing-up of the juveniles for show on these occasions, and so little chance of getting them quietly to bed, that Ann could not be counted on until a late hour.

It was a new experience for Bessy, and sent her thoughts back to Mrs Price's advertisement, and its promise, "Work light," when she began at six in a morning and was scarcely allowed to sit down until the last visitor departed at one, two, or sometimes three the next morning. So weary was she after the first of these parties that, although she threw herself on the bed dressed as she was, she over-slept, and Mr Price's shaving-water was quarter of an hour late, an offence so enormous that the fussy little man wasted another quarter of an hour in expounding his "particular" views of punctuality and duty, and forgiveness "for that occasion."

There were parties abroad, as well as these parties at home, and then Bessy was required to officiate as lady's-maid. She

did her best, but was certainly inexperienced, and was rewarded by ejaculations on her clumsiness, her stupidity, in the arrangement of finery for which she had not even a name. Sometimes Mr Price went direct from his place of business, sometimes from home, and then there was more running up and down stairs in attendance on him, to bring this or find that, than in waiting on the lady.

It was a relief when their cab rolled away from the door with them in it. But there was always a bedroom and dressing-room to be cleared and set in order; and long after Ann had gone to bed she was required to sit up, to keep a fire alight and have coffee ready for her master and mistress when they came home, at all hours in the morning.

She was a good needlewoman, and used to fill up the interval with sewing, sometimes for herself, sometimes for Ann; but it was not always easy to keep awake; yet, when the grey dawn crept in before they came home to their coffee, she began to

bestir herself as soon as *they* had gone to bed, with the sweeping and dusting of her ordinary morning work.

"She found it easier to sit up all night," she said, "than to rise in a couple of hours if she only went to rest at four in the morning."

"You can please yourself, Bessy, but don't say I kept you up," remarked Mrs Price, when Bessy said this, ignoring the fact that she had already been kept up; and she never thanked the girl for sitting alone far into the morning to have the comfortable coffee ready at a moment's notice — never made her a present in acknowledgment.

Spring was far advanced, and Bessy was in hopes this party giving and going would soon be over, when one morning the confectioner's errand-boy came with a message that her sister was at Mrs Amory's shop and wanted to see her. She had received no intimation of Sarah's coming since the letter in November, and she looked at the boy in astonishment.

"Wait," said she to him, and went to ask if she could be spared for a couple of hours that afternoon, as her sister was in town.

"I wonder you can ask such a thing," was the answer. "Am I not going to the theatre this evening?"

"I could be back in time to help you to dress," suggested Bessy.

"I gave you my answer."

Bessy set her lips with a look of determination.

"Tell my sister, if you please, that I cannot see her until this evening after half-past seven, and that she had better come up the lane to meet me," was the message she sent back by the boy, with the addendum, "and here is sixpence for your trouble."

Ann, coming downstairs with the youngest children arrayed for a walk, had lingered to hear what was going on. Sending the boys down the garden walk before her, she stopped a moment to say,—

"These lads will never go past Amory's

without a cake, so I shall have a chance of seeing your sister beforehand, and can tell how the land lies; and perhaps bring you some word back."

A nod and a smile were all Bessy's acquiescence, but she felt grateful to the kind-hearted nurse; and, closing the door, hurried back to shell peas and worry herself with anxiety on account of her sister, who had evidently come to Brassington on a sudden, and without a home or a place to go to.

She knew, also, that if Clara chose to tell tales her own situation would be risked if she went out. She had not been so comfortable as to make that of much account, but she had become attached to her fellow-servant, and did not care to leave *her*.

Ann was back with the unruly boys, Clara was home from school, the lamb, and peas, and mint sauce were on the dining-room table, and Mrs Price seated with her family around her, before she had a chance of hearing more from Ann than that she had seen her sister.

She then told her that Sarah had come to Brassington in search for a situation, and seemed to expect her sister to find her one without trouble or difficulty.

"But," said Ann, "I told her she'd have to get rid of some of her frills and furbelows if she wanted to get into a respectable place, and I don't think she thanked me, or believed me. However, I asked Mrs Amory if she knew of any decent people about, that your sister could stay with till she got into a situation; and Mrs Amory—bless her good heart!—said she would send her servant with Sarah to the house of one of her bakers, where she might perhaps stay to-night."

It was a load off Bessy's mind; nevertheless, she went about her work that afternoon as if in a dream. She thought Mrs Price was never so tedious or so fastidious over her *toilette*, and was thankful that she had to meet Mr Price in town—doubly thankful that Clara had gone to take tea with a schoolfellow.

The meeting with Sarah was anything but pleasing or cheering. Sarah had, as she

conjectured, left home in a huff. Emma White was installed at the farm and seemed of more account than she was, and she could not stand it. She had a quarrel with Reuben, and so she came away. She would rather be a servant to strangers than be ordered about by her brother. Oh, she should get a place soon enough, never fear; and she'd got a lodging, and she wasn't without money. Her mother had given her three pounds as she came away.

She did get a situation, and sooner than she deserved, for Bessy went with her as far as the confectioner's to thank Mrs Amory, and ask if she knew anyone in want of a domestic.

"Well," said Mrs Amory, "I've a sister whose servant is leaving in a few days; I'll speak to her. If this young woman is anything like yourself, I should think she would suit. But theirs is a tradesman's family, and there are children in the house."

And on the strength of Bessy's own character, as far as Mrs Amory could judge from what she had seen and heard of her,

Sarah was soon installed as general servant under the roof of Abel Moore, an ironmonger, whose wife took an active part in the management of her household—soon Bessy had the pleasure to hear her sister's industry and cleanliness well spoken of, and sent the report home for the consolation of the mother whose life had so few joys.

There were times when Bessy took herself to task for leaving her mother, and so setting up a precedent for her younger sister—times when she debated whether it was not her duty to return home and take her part in the farmhouse as of old. But Tom, and her father, and her Aunt Hales, all stood in the gap, and, one way or the other, she felt return to be impossible.

Amongst the village gossip Sarah had retailed was one item which cut her sister with a keener edge than she would have been willing to admit. Tom Ashtead was said to be making up to Rebecca Perks, Matty's companion ; and though she argued within herself that what he did, or whom he courted, was no manner of consequence

to her, the old wound was opened afresh, and smarted sorely.

Letters passed but seldom between Birch Farm and the two servant-maids in Brassington, but when they did Reuben was the scribe, and he never so much as named his old friend Tom, and Bessy was too proud to ask if Sarah's news was true. Yet she felt it very hard that he should forget her so soon.

Very quietly and sedately she went about her work, obeying orders without question or cavil, but without animation, and the Prices set her down as sulky. The work was, however, done, and done thoroughly ; and if she made no demonstration of affection for the children, there were no noisy quarrels with them in the kitchen.

Mrs Price, hard to please, had not settled the value of Bessy as a domestic when the question was unexpectedly settled for her.

In the autumn the brother and partner of Mr Price took unto himself a wife, and there was much feasting and visiting in consequence. Of course there was a party

at Laburnum Villa, and Bessy was at work late and early for days in advance; though now that baby was two years old Ann could give her occasional assistance, and, as if stimulated by the excitement of the wedding, the girls worked away with a will, and even Mrs Price seemed satisfied with the result.

I think I have made it sufficiently apparent that, however mean and parsimonious Mrs Price was in ordinary, there was neither stint nor scant in her entertainments; but I am not sure it is so clear that her maids had no liberty to help themselves out of the profusion. Mrs Price's hospitality stopped at the kitchen door. Her servants might look, and long for a taste of the dainties, but remnants fell to the children's share the next day, and a slice of cake or a spoonful of blanc-mange very rarely found its way to the domestics.

It so happened that on this occasion Mrs Price forgot to cut the girls their supper, or even to indicate what they might consume.

"Dear me," said Ann, after fidgeting

about, "I am so hungry. Are you sure missis never said what we might have? I should like a piece of that apple-pie."

Bessy was sitting wearily on a chair by the table, on which her elbow rested as a support for her hand; piles of plates were on the floor, and the dresser was filled with dishes of tempting viands in all stages of consumption. A tray of unwashed china coffee-cups half filled the deal table.

Without looking up she answered, "Quite sure! She was too much occupied with the bride to think of us. But I wouldn't touch the pie if I were you. She is certain to be cross if you do. For my part, I shall just have a cup of coffee; my appetite is gone."

"But mine is not, and I shall help myself to the pie. I must have something for my supper."

"I think you had better not," was Bessy's advice as she rose to pour out a cup of coffee for herself, and, after drinking it off, began to wash up the best china.

Ann had cut off a section of the pie;

Bessy, never too profuse with her speech, made no further comment, though she saw Ann devour it with rare gusto, and had her own opinion on the enormity of the offence.

Morning proved her right. There was a stern inquisition on the remains of the apple-pie.

Ann's confession that she ate it for her supper did not mend matters.

"You had not told us what we was to have," said Ann, "and I did not think there was any harm. I could not make my supper on a cup of coffee after a hard day's work, if Bessy could."

"You might have taken bread and cheese if you were hungry; but to help yourself to apple-pie without leave was a liberty I cannot overlook."

"And if I'd taken the cheese without leave it would have been just the same," quoth Ann deprecatingly.

"No impertinence; I'll not have it!"

"I don't think Ann meant to be impertinent," put in Bessy.

"Did she not? I see it in her face.

Perhaps there was no impertinence in eating the pie which should have come to the table to-day! But your conduct this week has not pleased me at all, Ann, and you had better provide yourself with a new situation by this day month."

"Very well, marm, and I hopes I may get a better one; for more unruly children I never did see, and food might be more plentiful," cried Ann, her temper up.

Mrs Price was leaving the kitchen, her own temper not under control. Bessy's simple "cup of coffee" recurred to her as an irritating reflection on scarcity in the midst of plenty. She turned round in the doorway, and addressing the young woman, said, with lofty asperity, "And if you are not satisfied, Bessy, you can leave at the same time."

"Very well, ma'am," was the sole response; and if Mrs Price expected Elizabeth Birch to protest that she was satisfied, for the sake of retaining her situation, she was disappointed.

Mrs Amory's shop was situated on the

main road, just below the fork of West Lane and East Lane, a favourable position, as commanding the private custom of both thoroughfares and their branches right and left, consequently she had a snug and respectable business.

Amongst her many customers she numbered the wife of a civil engineer named Cowper, whose house in Park Place turned a shoulder to East Lane at the summit of the hill.

It so happened that about three weeks after the wedding-party at Laburnum Villa, Mrs Cowper walked into Mrs Amory's shop for a bun for a little girl she held by the hand, and for some tea-cakes. They were both in mourning for an elder sister of the little one, then approaching her second year.

"Now, Fanny, you sit there and wait patiently," said Mrs Cowper, as she lifted the child to a tall chair and remained standing until a young woman with a basket at the counter was served. Then a bun was handed to the child, and, as the tea cakes were being papered, Mrs Cowper

asked, "Can you recommend a good servant to me, Mrs Amory?"

"Dear me, is your Irish girl leaving?" was the ejaculation which came in response.

"I am sorry to say—yes. Poor Bridget has never been herself since my little Geraldine died; the faithful creature, who was greatly attached to the child, attributed her death to some neglect on her part, and was not to be kept out of the room where the dead dear one lay. She has been ailing ever since, and now she has gone into the hospital, refusing to remain longer a burden on my hands. She has fretted herself into such a condition that she is not likely to leave the hospital for so long a time I am compelled to supply her place. If I am suited when she comes out, I must endeavour to find her a comfortable situation elsewhere."

"Dear me, I am sorry for the girl; she looked so neat and clean, and seemed so thoroughly content. But if you want another—why the very young woman who

was at this counter when you came in is leaving her place, and, I should think, would suit you exactly. She is a respectable, well-behaved girl—a farmer's daughter. Her sister is living with my sister, Mrs Moore, the ironmonger's wife down below, and is a hard-working, honest lass, though a bit given to finery, and gadding."

"There did not seem anything of that about the young woman just gone out. She appeared rather grave and sedate," remarked Mrs Cowper.

"So she is," replied the confectioner.

"And where is the girl living now?" was the next question.

"With a Mrs Price, at Laburnum Villa, West Lane; but pray don't mention that I have recommended Bessy Birch, for Mrs Price is a good customer of mine, and very touchy. If you are not in a hurry I can send the girl to you the next time she comes, or I can send a message to her."

"Oh, thank you, I shall be much obliged if you will. Come, Fanny, now you

have eaten your bun, we must be off to have papa's tea ready," and Mrs Cowper went her way.

The following afternoon the charwoman, on temporary duty at Park Place, opened the door for Bessy Price, whose composed demeanour—neither bold nor timid—made an impression on Mrs Cowper. She answered such questions as were put in respect to qualifications with modesty and propriety. But when she said "Ten pounds," in answer to the query what wages she expected, Mrs Cowper shook her head, and said that was more than she ever gave in the first instance; she did not mind an advance at the end of the year if a maid suited.

"I have ten pounds where I am, ma'am, but I would not mind taking nine if I had a comfortable home."

"I suppose Mrs Price would give you a character?"

"Oh yes, ma'am, if you do not mind writing a note to ask when she could see you."

And so it was arranged. Bessy hurried off, lest she should encounter a scolding.

The note was written and Mrs Price made an appointment.

It was a dirty, drizzly, wet October day. Not a day on which any sensible woman would adorn herself with superfine raiment to plod through the mire of suburban lanes. Mrs Cowper encased her feet in strong winter boots, and wrapped her shoulders in a thick grey woollen shawl—shawls had not then been superseded by mantles.

The road she took—a short cut between East Lane and West Lane—was unpaved and muddy, the rain came down drearily; she was glad she had clothed herself for the weather.

At Laburnum Villa she was shown into the drawing-room, and kept waiting long enough to have taken an inventory of the furniture, the showy ornaments, the glass and gilding, before Mrs Price sailed in, gay with ribbons and imposing in figured silk, to eye the little woman in the grey

woollen shawl and black merino dress from head to foot. She, however, motioned to her visitor to reseat herself on a couch, whilst she took a chair at right angles between the door and the piano. The full light of two windows was on their faces.

After a preliminary word or two, Mrs Cowper asked if the young woman was fond of children.

"Anything but that! Anything but that!" jerked out Mrs Price, throwing her head and body forward as she spoke, in a most unladylike manner, as if to give intensity to her words.

"Oh, then," said Mrs Cowper, rising, "I need ask nothing more. I have only one little girl, still, I *must* have a maid who likes children. But as she stood prepared to go, it came across her mind like a flash —"There was *temper* in that speech. It may be as well to ask something more, now I am here," and she sat down again.

"Is she honest and sober?"

"For anything I know to the contrary."

"Is she careful?"

"I do not give *my* servants an opportunity to waste."

"Well, I do not lock anything up, and it is a matter of importance to me?"

"A pretty housekeeper you must be!" was the expression on the face of Mrs Price, though she merely said "Oh!"

"Can she wash and iron?"

"I believe so; but as our washing is sent to a laundress, she merely helps the nurse to rub out a few of the children's things, and her own clothes; so I really cannot say."

"Can she cook at all?"

"A plain dinner. I never trust her to do anything particular, or to make pastry; I do it myself."

"Well, I expect my servant to cook. But I am prepared to instruct her first if she be willing to learn. She appears cleanly."

"Yes, but unless I look sharply after her she does not remove the furniture when she sweeps the rooms, and leaves dust in the corners. I have frequently to make her do it over again."

"Um!" thought Mrs Cowper, "this is not very promising. I wonder if it is true?" Then she put her final questions.

"I hope you will not think me intrusive if I ask what wages she has had, how long she has been with you, and your reasons for parting with her?"

"Oh, I gave her ten pounds, she has been with me eighteen months, and"—with a toss of the head—"my nurse was leaving, so, as I generally change both servants at once, I told Bessy that if she was not satisfied she might go too."

"Thank you, I think I shall try her," said Mrs Cowper, with a faint smile.

She had come to a swift conclusion that if the girl had kept her place so long, and virtually dismissed herself in the end, she could not be such a very bad servant after all.

"Yes, you can give her a month's trial," assented Mrs Price patronisingly, with a shrug of the shoulders, and in a tone which meant, "But you will not be satisfied with the result."

Bessy and Ann together waited on Mrs Cowper, both dressed alike, and otherwise so similar that the lady scarcely knew which was Bessy Birch.

The reason for coming so accompanied was soon apparent. After it was settled that Bessy should come for the customary "month on trial," she said to Mrs Cowper,—

"This is my fellow-servant, ma'am. She has been my only companion whilst with Mrs Price; she has got a situation as nurse at the bottom of the hill, and if you will be pleased to let me have my 'Sunday out' on the same afternoon as hers, I should be very much obliged. I have brought her with me that you might see she was a respectable companion for me. And I hope, ma'am, you don't object to my mother, or my brother, coming to see me if ever they come to Brassington."

"Certainly not. The ties of kindred should always be respected, And, Bessy, if you should happen to have a sweetheart —a respectable man fit for a decent girl—

we would rather that he came to see you *here* than have you meet him at street-corners, which is anything but reputable."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am, you are very kind. Mrs Price did not allow any followers, not even my own relations, who lived so far off. But I have no sweetheart, ma'am, to meet me either here or elsewhere," and, though her cheek flushed, there was a mournful cadence in her voice which suggested to her new mistress a story of heart-sorrow.

The day Bessy entered on her new situation, Mrs Price marched into the shop of Mrs Amory and accosted her abruptly.

"What business had you, Mrs Amory, to recommend *my* servant to anyone else."

Mrs Amory, taken aback, could only say,—

"Well, madam, Bessy said she was leaving you, and asked if I knew of a vacant situation, and as I happened to know her sister, when Mrs Cowper asked me to recommend a servant, I mentioned Bessy

Birch. I had no idea you didn't want to part with her."

"Part with her or not, Mrs Cowper, who came to *me* for her character huddled up in a great woollen shawl, has engaged her. And I hope the *woman* will have enough of her!"

And having jerked these words out with ill-tempered energy, Mrs Price left the shop without so much as a "Good afternoon."

CHAPTER IV.

HAND AND HEART.

"SO she hoped the woman would have enough of her, did she?" echoed Mrs Cowper, when Mrs Amory, annoyed at Mrs Price's unladylike dictation, repeated her irate observation to Bessy's new mistress.

"Yes; and it's my opinion she never either intended or expected Bessy to go, and is mad the girl took her at her word. It's much to me if she finds two young women likely to stop with her so long as the two who have just left. Until Ann went there, two years ago, a servant very rarely stayed at Laburnum

Villa more than two or three months; and many of those who went on trial were either turned out or turned themselves out before the month was up. You see, ma'am, I've been here many years, and in an open shop, where one has the custom of a neighbourhood, all sorts of news and gossip come without seeking, and it's not possible to shut our ears or our eyes. In does not need much discrimination in a business like ours to distinguish between the good servants and the bad ones, or the good mistresses and bad ones, amongst customers, or to know if one side or the other complains without cause. But behind a counter you must hear, see, and say nothing; and had not Mrs Price been so insulting, even to myself, I do not suppose I should have mentioned her rudeness now."

"Well, Mrs Amory," said Mrs Cowper, as she opened her purse to pay for a sponge-cake she had been buying, "I have a theory that—allowing for individual difference of disposition and previous train-

ing—servants are, as a rule, pretty much what their mistresses make them. In my mother's household, the maids generally remained until they married, and went to homes of their own, and certainly were friends of the family in their humbler sphere. But times are much changed, and in few things more than in the relations between employers and the employed. Ceremony has abolished familiarity, and much of the old hearty good-feeling has gone with it, I am sorry to say."

"Indeed, you're right," said the confectioner, while she wrapped up some gingerbread for a child; "and I think sometimes nowadays ladies often hire their servants as if they were only sweeping and dusting machines, and grumble if the machines get out of order for want of a little sympathetic oil."

"Just so; I think Mrs Price is one of that class. At all events, though she gave me but an indifferent character with Bessy Birch, I find no reason to complain as yet. However, I shall be better able to judge

after a while. Bessy is but a new broom at present. Good day."

Nor did Mrs Amory hear any complaints from either mistress or maid.

The fact is, Bessy very soon discovered that she had made a change for the better. There was less pretence in the Cowper household than the Prices', and more comfort.

On her entrance, Mrs Cowper had not merely indicated the room in which she was to sleep, and in which the porter had to deposit her box, but went with her over the house, merely specifying the uses of the several rooms ; and, in the girl's own department, showing where food, napery, culinary or other utensils, brooms, and such domestic appliances were kept, little Fanny trotting beside them, quietly observant, as if measuring the new maid in her undeveloped mind.

The survey ended with a sort of speech from Mrs Cowper, who stood with her hand resting on the well-scrubbed kitchen table.

"Now, Bessy, I have shown you where

everything is kept, and I would impress upon you that I expect you to keep things in the places where you find them. When I enter a new house I make all my own arrangements, and I like them to be preserved as far as possible." ("Oh, dear," thought Bessy, "I hope she is not one of the *very particular* people.") "You see that if my servant is away for a holiday, I like to be sure where to lay my own hands on anything I might want to use."

"Certainly," said Bessy, thinking, "that is only reasonable."

"You will see," Mrs Cowper went on, "that nothing is locked up; but not because I can afford to waste—no one can do that whilst there is a beggar needing food—but because I expect you to be as careful of our food and our property as if it were your own. I hope you understand the difference between frugality and parsimony."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well, then, you will understand the nature of the trust I repose in you. We wash on a Tuesday; sweeping and

cleaning days you can settle for yourself. I shall not interfere with you so long as you do your work properly ; but you must quite understand that I cannot do with surface cleaning. No dust must be left in corners, and the backs of chairs must be as bright as the fronts. I dare say," she continued, " from this long exordium, you imagine I am very particular." (Bessy did.) "*I am.* But I trust I am not a fidget ; and I think it is due to you, as well as to myself, that we begin with a proper understanding. And I think we shall do that better if you are told that I do not think the duties of maid or mistress begin and end with work done and money paid—so much labour for so many coins. There is heart service as well as hand service ; and here the mistress must take her part as well as the maid. Both myself and Mr Cowper take an interest in those who serve us faithfully, and we hope our servants feel the same interest in us. I told you before that I do not allow outdoor gossip, but that you are welcome to receive

either a respectable friend or sweetheart *here* at reasonable times. And now, Fanny, dear, let us leave Bessy to set the tea-tray. It is time you were washed and had a clean pinafore; papa will be home soon."

And whilst Bessy, struck with the contrast between Mrs Cowper's opening address and that of Mrs Price, could only give expression to her feelings in a sober—"Thank you, ma'am; you are very kind," her new mistress, taking the child by the hand, left her to herself.

"It would be a poor tale if I couldn't keep this place in order," murmured Bessy, in an undertone, as she moved about between tray-rest, table, cupboard, and pantry, or stirred the fire as a hint to the kettle; "the family is really so small, though the house is, I think, as large as the Prices'; and everything is nice and clean to start with—no holes and corners to be routed out *here* that I can see. I wonder if Mrs Cowper has had a charwoman or done the work herself whilst without servant. It

does not look like the slipshod cleaning of a charwoman. At all events, mistress must have had a hand in it."

Bessy had a vivid recollection of the turnout of mouldy rags and other foul refuse from the kitchen drawers and cupboards, and beneath the scullery sink, with which accumulations "particular" Mrs Price had accredited servant and charwoman antecedent to her own advent, and she had not forgotten the remark,—"Ah! they're all the same; you never find out what they've left till a fresh servant comes. It's wholesome to make a change now and again." And the difference impressed her with a sense of Mrs Cowper's thoroughness rather than of vexatious particularity.

Mrs Cowper's sitting-room was a pleasant apartment, in general occupation, even for meals. Though at the back of the house, it had a southern aspect, and a glass door, with a tinted border, opened on a winding path, among tall evergreens down to the main garden—a bit of shrubbery which kept the yard and brewhouse well

out of sight. It was infinitely preferable to the larger and more elaborately furnished withdrawing-room, which never had a glimpse of sunshine, and needed artificial light to set it off.

Into this bright room Bessy carried the tea-tray, and here Mrs Cowper kept her tea-caddy. Into the teapot went Mrs Cowper's *quantum* of tea, and then the spoon went into the caddy and left the contents in a cup. This was handed to Bessy.

"There is your tea; you know which is your small teapot. You can have your tea whilst we have ours; but you will have to bring in a fresh cup."

"If you please, ma'am, where is the kitchen butter kept?" then asked Bessy.

Mrs Cowper looked up.

"Kitchen butter! I do not keep two kinds. You will use the same that we do."

"Oh; I did not know!" said Bessy, in the tone of one caught in an involuntary confession.

There was the click of a latch-key in the front door.

"Papa! Papa!" cried Fanny, scampering off to meet him; and, before Bessy could leave the room, her new master—a tall, fine-looking man—stood in the doorway, with Fanny in his arms. On the threshold he paused—a genial smile lit his face.

"So this is Bessy, I suppose. Well, my lass, I hope you will be comfortable here, and that you will make us comfortable too."

His smile was reflected in Bessy's face.

"I hope so, too, sir," said she, and passed out to the kitchen much more cheerily than when Mr Price held her under inquisition.

A keen observer was Mr Cowper. Before the night was out he said to his wife,—

"I like that girl's face. It is not handsome, and there is a gravity about it very unusual in one of her years. I should say

there had been some great sorrow in her life which had taken the light out of it. But she looks thoroughly reliable and trustworthy; and she'll soon cheer up in my little wife's care, I know. What does Fanny think of her?"

"Well, I was going to take Fanny to bed, and Bessy offered to do it. I expected the child would object. But no; she said, 'Yes, Bessy put me to bed. Good-night, mamma!' and up went the rosy mouth to be kissed, as her foot was on the stair. I think it augurs well for our new maid, does the child's confidence in her; for she certainly had made no attempt to cajole or win Fanny over."

"I think so, too. A child's instinct may be trusted."

Mr Cowper dined at home the following day. There was a shoulder of mutton to be roasted, vegetables to be boiled, and a jam tart to be made.

Mrs Cowper, having been told that Bessy was no pastrycook, went into the kitchen to make the tart, and, without seeming to

observe, took note of her new maid's proceedings.

"We have onion sauce served with shoulder of mutton, Bessy. You will find a rope or two of onions in the larder. Do you know how to make it?"

"Yes, ma'am;" and Bessy explained her process.

It was as satisfactory as her treatment of the vegetables and the joint—as satisfactory as her own treatment when dinner was placed upon the table.

"Another hot plate" was asked for. It was brought, and Bessy was retiring.

"Stay," said her master, "whilst I cut your dinner; we like our domestic to have her meals as warm as ours."

"That will be sufficient for me, sir," remarked Bessy, as the carving-knife went again to the joint.

"Nonsense," he answered. "A girl that works hard requires good food."

"Yes, sir, but I have a small appetite," was her reply, to which she felt strongly inclined to add that he had already laid on

her plate double the quantity Mrs Price would have deemed sufficient.

Bessy enjoyed her dinner. It was the first warm and comfortable meal she had had since she left home, the comfort being enhanced by a clean kitchen table-cloth, salt-cellar, and pepper-box—three decencies which had no place in Mrs Price's kitchen; moreover, she had uninterrupted leisure to eat it, had her full share of the jam tart, and was told she had cooked the whole very nicely, which telling served her for dessert.

The word of approbation sent her about her work cheerily; it was something new to her. She had only known when Mrs Price was satisfied by the absence of fault-finding. Praise was a stimulant not in that lady's vocabulary.

On the second Sunday when Ann called for Bessy to go out, a heavy shower was falling.

Mrs Cowper, sitting by the drawing-room window with Fanny on her lap, saw her pass to the side entrance. Immediately

after, although it was not tea time, Bessy brought in the tray, and arranged the table in readiness very orderly.

"I suppose I can go now, ma'am?" she said.

"Yes, unless you would prefer asking your friend to stay and have tea with you, as it is raining. It may clear up before church time."

Bessy's eyelids raised.

"Thank you, ma'am;" and she left the room with a sort of courtesy, Fanny struggling from her mamma's lap to run and make the acquaintance of the new arrival.

"Mrs Cowper says I had better ask you to stay and have tea with me, as it is wet; so you may as well take your things off, Ann, and hang them up," she began, on her return to the kitchen.

"Do what?" exclaimed Ann, in surprise. "Well, that's more than *my* missis would say, though she's not as stingy as Mrs Price! It's very kind of Mrs Cowper, I must say."

"Yes, she is very kind, and so is master;

and the child's a dear little thing—one cannot help but love it."

"H'sh! Little pitchers have long ears."

Bessy turned; Fanny, close at her heels, gave her hand a little squeeze, then scampered off to justify Ann's remark by reporting the speech concerning herself, with the addition—"and me love Bessy."

"H'm," came, between the whiffs of a cigar, from Mr Cowper. "I thought Bessy did not like children?"

"Ah, it is but one of Mrs Price's fables!" cried his wife. "Bessy's all right so far; she goes about her work systematically and steadily, and, I think, will prove a valuable servant—but time tries all."

Conversation in the kitchen went on, after Fanny ran off, much in the same strain, Ann telling how she got on in the nursery with her charges—of the baby who was teething, and kept her awake at night; but she ended by saying, "Still the children are not such rapscallions as the Prices', and missis *has* a conscience, and

she don't starve one, and don't set the children to tell tales."

Bessy laid her cloth, and set her little tray for tea.

Ann opened her eyes.

"My word, how grand we are! What would Mrs Price say if she saw us? A table-cloth and a tray! You beat us at Middleton's even. And that's good butter; we've only tub butter."

"Yes, Ann, and I don't have to wait till the dinner is cold to have a morsel doled out as if to a beggar. I have it hot and comfortable; and, talking of beggars, they're not turned from the door here as if they were thieves. Mrs Cowper says she would rather be twice taken in than once dismiss a case of real necessity. And, when my work is done, Mrs Cowper finds me books to read; really good books—not trash."

"Well, Bessy, I should say you've lit upon your feet. I never had such a place but once, and then missis died. But I'd have done *anything* in the world for *her*.

An' I should think you'd put your best foot foremost here."

"That I would!" was spoken with emphasis.

She did, and as the months went by, both Bessy and her mistress made fresh discoveries, little to the credit of Mrs Price. Mrs Cowper had long discovered that Bessy did *not* leave dust in corners, or behind furniture; that she was a good and a frugal cook, and, after the lapse of time, that she could make as light pastry as herself, and was willing to do it. An offer to "get up" the lace collars and sleeves, which Mrs Cowper had hitherto done for herself, somehow elicited the fact that Mrs Price did *not* put out her washing; that she sent to the laundress no more than did Mrs Cowper, namely, the master's linen and the muslins, and that instead of Bessy "helping the nurse to rub out a few things for the children," it was Ann who helped *her* from four in the morning until twenty minutes past seven, and that at a large family wash, interrupted by the putting up of lines, the

hanging out of clothes, and the daily demands of the household.

It was the first thing Bessy had said against her former mistress, and it only came out in correcting what she considered a mistake. Mrs Cowper could not refrain from reporting it, both to her own spouse and Mrs Amory.

"What a liar that woman must be!" exclaimed Mr Cowper. "She certainly deserves exposing. First entraps a girl with a spurious advertisement, then overworks her, and, when she throws off the galling yoke, tries to rob her of her livelihood. It is to be hoped there are not many women like her."

"Ah, Jack, I'm afraid there are more Mrs Prices than one in the world. Don't you remember what an indifferent character I had with poor Bridget? And I'm sure a more faithful, honest, sober, industrious and cleanly girl never came into a house. Her only failings were a bad memory and a want of order and system. She could never put up her tins and brasses in their

places—I had always to re-arrange them ; but she had as warm a heart as ever beat in a breast."

"Yes, my dear, and that shows the double injustice that may be done by a woman of Mrs Price's temper and calibre. If your discernment had not penetrated beneath the surface of actual expression, we might have lost a good servant, and Bessy a—well, suppose we say—a pretty tolerable place."

. . . . . .

"Oh, yes, ma'am, I know it's true," said Mrs Amory ; "all Mrs Price's servants say the same thing. She has had quite a regiment—changing almost every second month since Bessy and Ann left—and all complain of a large, rude family, and heavy washes which they never bargained to do. Some of them seemed quite downcast and oppressed, and others tossed their heads, and said they liked to do things to spite her. It's an old saying, madam, that 'a good Jack makes a good Jill ;' and I say a good mistress may make a good maid.

But"—and she paused—"have you heard that your Bessy's sister is leaving my sister?"

"No, I have not. Bessy is not talkative, and not communicative. Perhaps she does not wish to intrude on us with her affairs. I have observed that she seemed depressed by a letter she received; but her letters generally seem to have a saddening influence, so I did not think it anything unusual. If it is a fair question, why is Sarah leaving? I thought she was a capital servant."

"Well, Mrs Cowper, so she is hard-working, clean, and brisk; but you know there are young men in my brother-in-law's shop, and Sarah will waste her time gossipping with them; and she is too fond of finery and going out."

"Not a very uncommon failing that in young women of much higher social rank than Sarah," was Mrs Cowper's smiling reply; "and, in moderation, I see no harm in it. There must be something wrong in the life of a girl who does not care for a chat

with the young men. Neither you nor I found our husbands in a nunnery, I've a suspicion. I'll have a talk to Bessy about her sister."

When Mrs Cowper reached home, she found a neatly-dressed woman, rather over middle-age, in the kitchen with Bessy. She wore a plain black satin bonnet, lined with white; there were loops of narrow white satin ribbon in the cap border, in which her clear-complexioned face was set; a well-saved shot-silk shawl, which had been bought very *many* years before, was thrown open on account of the heat, and, under all, was a plain brown merino dress. A large, white wicker basket was on the ground beside her.

She rose on Mrs Cowper's entrance.

"My mother, from Kitknoll," was Bessy's introduction.

Mrs Cowper put out her hand.

"How do you do, Mrs Birch? I am glad to see you. I always am glad to see the relatives of those who serve me well."

"Then Bessy gives you satisfaction,

ma'am? That's a good hearing. But she always was a good, steady girl; though she's had her troubles, poor thing, like the rest of us."

"So we have supposed; but Bessy has not talked of her troubles, and has done her work in spite of them, like a brave girl. I suppose her sister's loss of situation is a fresh trouble to you all?"

"Yes, ma'am; I was not aware she had told you. It was a trouble the lass leaving home at all. She was wanted on the farm."

"Bessy did not tell me. I heard it whilst I have been out; and I have also heard that a friend of ours is in want of a servant, and have mentioned Sarah to her. Mrs Leeke has seen Bessy frequently, and, I think, from her appearance and conduct, is already prepossessed in favour of her sister. But Sarah had better see me before she waits on Mrs Leeke. And I think, Bessy, you had better ask your mother to take off her bonnet and have dinner with you, after coming so far."

Both Bessy and her mother looked pleased. After thanking her mistress, the former said,—

"Mother has taken the liberty to bring you some butter of her own making, and a few fresh-laid eggs; and she brought a few cherries and a posy for Miss Fanny, if you will please to accept them."

Of course she accepted them, as much gratified in receiving as they in giving. The cherries and the "posy" were already in Miss Fanny's possession—the former fast disappearing; the sweet-scented nosegay, odorous of gratitude and goodwill, was placed in water, on a stand by the window, over which Fanny was keeping guard—with pairs of cherries looped over her little ears as adornments.

It was no light matter that had brought Mrs Birch so far from her own hearthstone. She was anxious about Sarah, whose flightiness had been a source of serious uneasiness before she left home, and had come to ascertain for herself *why* she was leaving the ironmonger's, being

anything but satisfied by Sarah's own account. Then she had all a mother's longing to see Elizabeth (or Bessy), and assure herself that she was doing well, and not pining after Tom Ashtead. But she brought little comfort for the girl in any way.

There had been a quarrel at the Ashteads', it was believed because Tom refused to marry Rebecca Perks, and Tom was going out to Australia to join his cousin, who had a sheep-run somewhere in Victoria.

Her father grew worse and worse; sometimes he stayed at her Aunt Hailes' for days together, spending his money like water; and if it were not for Reuben the farm would go to ruin. "He was a good lad," she said, "and did his best to keep his father in order, but that was scarcely possible, for he would drink nearly a pint of brandy before breakfast. Emma White could manage him the best; he was somehow ashamed of showing off before her. Reuben seemed to have a mind to the

lass ; and really," she said, "he might do worse. Emma would make a thrifty farmer's wife, and a lad with such a father could not pick and choose. As for Jim, he was fair off his head after that flirty Matty Ashtead, who was all smiles one day, and all scorn the next, and had more strings to her bow than her bonnet. If it had not been for Reuben, Jim would have been off and listed for a soldier, more than once, and all through her. It was a great comfort that Reuben stuck by the farm so steadily."

"Yes," Bessy assented, "so it is ;" but she sighed heavily, as if she felt the words a reproach to herself, though nothing had been farther from the mother's thought.

They saw Sarah, and her mistress ; and, finding what was the cause of complaint, gave the former a good "talking to," which she did not take at all too kindly.

"People are so mighty particular," she said, with a flounce ; "as if I am bound to have neither eyes, nor ears, nor tongue, if

a young man speaks civilly. I did my work, and what more did they want?"

"Wanted you to respect yourself, and not disgrace your family," was Bessy's answer.

"Umph! I think that's pretty well disgraced already," was the pert reply, which brought a flush to the cheeks of her sister, and tears into the mild eyes of her mother.

"I think mother has quite enough to bear, without you having a fling at her," Bessy observed reproachfully; whereupon Sarah flung her arms around the mother's neck, and entreated forgiveness, promising to be "sober as old Time" in her next place.

For that next place with Mrs Leeke she was indebted to Mrs Cowper, and to the discreet conduct of her less erratic sister.

Mrs Cowper, without seeming to know anything of her flightiness, informed her that the Leekes' had a house, with the manufactory, in town, and another in the country; that, notwithstanding their riches, they were plain people in habits and

manners, and would treat her well if she behaved well. But, as she would be wanted for the town house, and numbers of their hands, both male and female, passed the kitchen on their way through the open yard to the manufactory, she would be required to comport herself steadily, and not make free with any of them—even if they came to the door with messages. Mrs Leeke was in the manufactory as well as her husband, and, so long as she found her servants trustworthy, was a liberal mistress; but she was keen-eyed and suspicious, and if she once suspected her of misconduct of any kind, would dismiss her on the instant. So she knew what she had before her.

Sarah wondered if Mrs Cowper had heard why she was leaving Mrs Moore. But she promised to do her duty if Mrs Leeke engaged her. And by the end of the week she was hard at work for Mrs Leeke.

Not long after this, Mr Cowper had the offer of a lucrative appointment in London,

in connection with a railway in progress. For some time he debated whether it was worth while to throw up the post he held, and break up his home in Brassington ; but still more advantageous terms being offered, he determined to explore the ground himself first before removing his family.

He had barely been gone three weeks, and Mrs Cowper was seated at breakfast reading a lively letter from her liege lord, when she thought she heard a curious noise in the kitchen, and, bidding Fanny sit still, went to ascertain what it was.

She found Bessy with an open letter clutched in a trembling clasp, her head upon her arms on the table, and her whole frame convulsed with sobs.

"My poor girl," she said, in a tone of deep sympathy, "what is the matter? Why are you so distressed? Is there anything I can do for you? Have you ill news from home?" And a kindly arm went round Bessy's shoulders. "My dear! what is it?" she continued. "Many times both myself and Mr

Cowper have said you had some deep sorrow in your life to make you so grave; but we had no right to intrude on private griefs, which you so bravely covered up. Your mother openly admitted you had a heavy cross to bear. It might lighten your load if you were to unburthen your mind to a friend. If you are not afraid to take me into your confidence, I may be able to give you either comfort or counsel; but if you would rather seek your sister, or your friend Ann, you are at liberty to go at once, if the matter is urgent."

"Thank you, ma'am; but my trouble is not one I could talk to Ann about. It is, in part, a family trouble, and my sister has had her share of it, but in a different way. She does not take things to heart as I do, and it is not a thing to take advice upon—and—and I can only look to God for comfort—and to time. I shall be better soon, ma'am;" and, as she said it, Bessy rose as if to resume her neglected duties—breakfast untouched. Then, as if she felt that she had repulsed Mrs Cowper's sympathy

ungraciously, she said, choking down her sobs, "the truth is, ma'am, I have an aunt who keeps a public-house, and that has led my father on to drink; and—and I had a sweetheart, and his relations said he would disgrace his family if he married me, because of father; and so I gave Tom up, and came into service. And now he is going away to Australia, and he has written to say it is all my fault."

"Perhaps you gave him up too hastily," observed Mrs Cowper.

"I think not, ma'am. Tom seemed to feel the disgrace as much as his family, and I really could not blame him. Father's conduct *is* outrageous! Poor mother suffers dreadfully! But these are not things I ought to talk about; and—don't trouble yourself about me, ma'am. I see you are sorry for me, and it is very kind of you; but I shall be all right in a day or two."

And, to outward appearance, she *was* all right in a day or two. The discharge of her pent-up feelings in tears, and the un-

bosoming of their source to her friendly mistress had done something towards her relief.

Moreover, it seemed to set up a new bond beween the mistress and her maid, to whom no duty appeared too heavy or too arduous.

It is not to be supposed that either was perfect; and on one occasion when Mrs Cowper had blamed her for something Bessy either had done or had not done, the former asked, suddenly,—

"How is it, Bessy, that whenever I find fault with you over anything I get no answer? In fact, you preserve a dogged silence when spoken to."

"Well, the truth is, ma'am," answered Bessy, giving a more vigorous polish to a brass candlestick, "I've a very bad temper—yes, ma'am, I have; and if I was to answer I might say something I might be sorry for afterwards; so I just shut my tongue within my teeth till my temper goes down."

"An admirable plan!" said the mistress,

"if you *have* a bad temper," and her tone implied a doubt.

"Yes, ma'am, I have. I know Mrs Price thought me sullen. But I had to keep my teeth shut there pretty close; and it was better to be thought sullen than let my temper out and provoke someone else to be ill-tempered too."

Mrs Cowper never mistook Bessy's silence again, and her respect for the young woman grew stronger. But, indeed, the esteem was mutual, and very soon put to the proof.

CHAPTER V.

MRS PRICE SEEKS ADVICE.

THE appointment offered to Mr Cowper in London was one in connection with a railway in progress, and in a monetary aspect much better than the one he held in Brassington ; but as its acceptance involved the breaking up of a comfortable home, or, rather, its transport to unknown regions and untried associations, and the parting from old friends, he deliberated—discussing the question in all its bearings with his little wife—and declined. An advance was then made on the offer, more discussion followed, and the result was acceptance.

Removals of this kind are not made in a hurry. His present post had to be resigned; a fresh tenant found for their charming abode in Park Place; household goods to be packed and disposed of; and for this more than three months were required.

At the outset a proposal was made for Bessy to accompany them to London—her wages had already been advanced. It was a simple enough proposal, but one which seemed to involve as much consideration as the more weighty proposal to her master.

She was herself desirous to continue with them, so kindly had she been treated. If she had been ill or out of sorts, due consideration had been made; until at length she felt herself a part of the family, and their interests identical with her own, as they evidently had intended she should feel.

But she had her mother to consult, and was afraid she would not like her to go so far out of reach.

"You have never yet had a holiday, Bessy; suppose you go home for a week, and talk the matter over with your friends," suggested Mrs Cowper.

Bessy changed colour. What sort of a reception would she have at Kitknoll? True, Tom was no longer there to beset her path, but would not the whole village, and the Ashteads especially, blame her as the cause of his emigration? She hesitated but a moment, then thanked her mistress, and went in the strength and consciousness of her own integrity.

She found things much as they had been described. Emma White, who owed no filial duty to Farmer Birch, interposing a strong hand between him and Mrs Birch, as none of his own children had dared to do; and when Reuben confided to her his intent to make Emma his wife in a year or two, Bessy congratulated him on his choice, and said she thought he could not do better.

Coarse and brutal were her father's allusions to the departure of Tom Ashtead, and her home-coming, when he was no

longer there to meet her; but she kept guard over her own tongue, and let his wag at will.

It only made her more inclined to accept the proposal of the Cowpers, even though her mother was adverse.

"It is so very far away. Suppose anything was to happen, how could we reach you?"

"But, what should happen?" asked Bessy. "And is there not a railway, and a post-office within reach? London is not as far as Australia."

"Well, but—" and there was a world of unspoken apprehension in the incomplete sentence; which was never finished.

Bessy returned to Park Place as dubious as she went.

Sarah came to see her the Sunday after her return.

To her Bessy's hesitation was incomprehensible.

"Not go to London when you have a chance, and with such a master and missis?" she cried, uplifting her hands

with amazement. "I should jump for joy if such an offer was made to me. Mrs Cowper doesn't knit her brows, and question you over everybody that calls, and every penny you go to lay out, as if she expected to be robbed or cheated ; and she doesn't expect you to get a shilling's worth of garden stuff for sixpence, or half-a-crown's worth of groceries for two shillings ; and she doesn't think you've brought short weight, and charged her for full weight, and put the change in your pocket, as Mrs Leeke does. It's one comfort to know she pokes and pries, and watches and spies, and suspects the girls in the manufactory as well. I could never stand it if I thought it was only me. And some day I expect there'll be a row over that chip money."

"Chip money! What's that?" interrupted Bessy.

"Why, don't you know, all the waste wood, slopings and chips, big and little, 's cleared out of the workshops every Saturday, and heaped up in the yard,

and it's sold for firewood, a cartload, or a basketful at a time, just as it happens. The folk come and help themselves, and bring the money to me or anyone in the kitchen, and the piles of copper lie there in the window, for everyone going through the yard to see, and the kitchen door always stands wide open."

"That seems to me more like careless trust in others than meanness and suspicion," suggested Bessy.

"Ah, so you would think; but I've a notion she can tell to a shilling how much the wood should bring in every week; and I can tell you I don't like the responsibility, for the yard gates stand wide open and anybody can come in, and if, some of these days, one of the poor little ragged mites sent for a penn'orth of chips should find no one to take the penny, and walk off with the pile of copper as well as the chips, the blame would fall on my shoulders, as sure as a gun. And I don't half like it, and so I say that I wish I was in your place. And I say, Bessy, if you're such a fool as not to

know when your bread's well buttered, and don't care to have a sight of London, I do; and if you won't go with Mrs Cowper, I will!"

"I think your sister might have waited until she was asked," said Mrs Cowper, when Bessy announced her own conclusion to migrate along with those she served, and at the same time reported Sarah's offer. "She may be a very good servant, but she would not suit me. She left her own home without sufficient cause, and I consider her wish to go with us less as a compliment than as an undesirable desire for change on her part."

Mrs Cowper was then in the very throng and confusion of selection and package. She was an active little woman, and wished to have all the linen and breakables safe before strange hands were laid upon them, and she did not care to leave all to the last. Mr Cowper had run up to London to make arrangements there.

In the midst of it little Fanny, taking advantage of the pre-occupation of the

elders, ran out into the garden, often without her hat, and, it was supposed, sat down on the damp grass.

She was taken ill, apparently with a slight cold, grew worse, the doctor was sent for in the evening; he delayed his coming until the morning, ordered a little medicine, and treated the matter lightly. His assistant came the next day, with no apparent knowledge of the case or of his master's treatment; he, too, regarded it as a slight ailment, said "she must be kept warm," and went away.

The following day brought Mr Cowper to find his little pet flushed and feverish, and almost too languid to notice him—but no doctor.

In the middle of the night the child became alarmingly worse. Mr Cowper, dressing hastily, hurried off in quest of the nearest surgeon, leaving his wife and Bessy to do their unskilled best.

Door-plates he found, and bell-handles, but not a doctor who would leave his bed "for a child" until he reached the very heart

of Brassington, and then a good physician rose to do his duty. A young surgeon also was found. Their own doctor was away at some *races* or other.

It was six o'clock when Dr M—n reached the bedside. It was then "too late"—a case of "suppressed measles," he said.

Yet did the good physician all that science could to fight with the disease. There were three or four more anxious days and nights, when the child was restless, and all her cry was, "Walk about." And then did Mrs Cowper learn the worth of Bessy; for night or day was as one to her in her loving service to the little one, and to them.

"Lie down a bit, missis, you will be worn out," she would say; "I will carry her about." And so she took her turns to pace the chamber floor with the child in her arms, to relieve the anxious father and mother; composed in demeanour, woefully troubled at heart, her household work a minor consideration.

And when, in spite of science, or skill, or care, or loving clasp, the child was gone

and the parents' hearts were desolate, she, whose own sad bosom had found a place for the winning little blossom, set herself to comfort and tend the afflicted mother, who had been sorely overtaxed with packing before the sick-watching and sorrow began, and broke down utterly after the funeral.

Sickness in a well-appointed house, with all appliances at hand and in order, is a trial to the patience and endurance of the attendants. What must it have been in the dismantled villa where linen and most of the smaller moveables were stowed away in boxes and packing-cases! It was a time to try the mettle of Bessy, and well she stood the test. Her self-command was invaluable, her power of self-sacrifice was proved.

It was at first thought that Mrs Cowper would not be able to bear the journey, and that her husband, whose presence in London was imperative, would have to go on in advance alone. But, disregarding the dictum of the doctors, Mrs Cowper braced

herself up for the effort, and after a few days' unavoidable delay they went together, Bessy with them, a tried friend as well as a servant; and when Mr Cowper, who had small time to spare, hired a trap to drive from place to place, and house to house, set down on agents' lists, Bessy had her seat at the back, and thus saw more of London and its suburbs than otherwise might have been possible.

The bustle and excitement of house-hunting, unpacking, and partial refurnishing, left Mrs Cowper no leisure to brood over her loss; but she was not strong, and Bessy saw it, and wherever it was possible exerted herself to save her mistress.

It was well for that little woman she then had new surroundings, for her connections were far away, and she was, of necessity, left much alone.

In London, however, Mr Cowper had friends; they had therefore many invitations abroad, and kept more company at home; but Bessy would have no helpers.

"No charwoman or hired waiters for

me! I did without them at Mrs Price's, where there was a tribe of rude children to hinder one, and I can do without them here," she maintained. "Besides, I don't care to be responsible for another person's care or honesty. If something were lost or broken I should feel as if I might be blamed. I would rather by half do the work myself."

And she did, and that without apparent effort; was never in a bustle, never untidy or grimy.

It goes without telling that her wages were again advanced, but it was not greatly; she did not seek it, and wages had not reached their present rate.

About eighteen months went by. Mrs Cowper had been consoled by the advent of a baby-boy, at whose christening there were grand doings, and Bessy had her hands full; she got through without any feverish haste, and more than one of Mrs Cowper's feminine guests envied her the possession of so neat and capable a domestic.

But before the child could well run about, and whilst all seemed smooth and calm, a letter came to Mr Cowper bearing the Broomwood post-mark. It came from a stranger—Farmer Ashtead—and enclosed another for Bessy. The one to *Bessy* begged her return home immediately, as her father had been taken suddenly ill, and that was written by Reuben. The outer letter, marked private, desired Mr Cowper to allow Elizabeth Birch to return home without delay, but on no account to let her know the full reason, which was that her father, in a fit of delirium, *had hanged himself in the barn.* The letter went on to say that all the neighbours were full of sympathy for the widow and her family, who were well-conducted and well-esteemed; and it ended with a suggestion that Elizabeth should be gradually prepared for finding her father dying or *dead.*

"Oh," said Bessy, "I know it is something very bad, or the letter would have come direct to me.

"Yes, my dear, it is very bad," said her mistress, with her own eyes moist; "your father has injured himself, and is not expected to recover."

Then Bessy burst out into self-reproaches, for coming to London in contravention of her mother's wishes; and was not to be consoled.

"Oh, my poor mother," she cried; "to think she should not have one of her own girls with her at such an hour."

A new thought then struck her.

"Oh, ma'am, and what will you do, left without a servant, and with baby to be nursed,—oh, dear, dear!"

"Never mind me, Bessy, you will be coming back soon."

"Oh, no, ma'am, I shall never leave mother to come so far again. But, my dear missis, if ever you should go back to Brassington, wherever I may be, I will come back to you if you write for me."

Whilst she had been hurriedly putting the rooms in order, collecting her belongings and packing them, Mr Cowper had

obtained her a railway pass, and had a cab waiting at the door when she was ready. And he himself saw her and her luggage safely off—a sure token of the respect in which this servant-maid was held.

In a few weeks came a letter from Bessy with the sad details of affairs at Birch Farm. Her father had died without will. Reuben, who had been privately married to Emma White for six months, had "put his mother to her thirds," so the farm and stock would have to be sold. It was valued at no more than twelve thousand pounds, so much had it lost in value through her father's negligence and abuse. Jim had carried out his threat, and enlisted only the week before his father hanged himself, Matty Ashtead having refused him point-blank. She added that Matty had turned up her nose at his offer, and said she would "scorn to marry the son of a drunkard like his father," and that it was supposed Ralph Birch had been taunted with this after his son's enlistment, when verging on *delirium tremens*, and, adding to its horrors,

remorse had prompted the last dread act. She said, too, that her sister had come home for the funeral, but seemed unsettled, and was not likely to remain with them long. She had left Mrs Leeke some time. The letter wound up with Bessy's intention to stay with her mother, but coupled with it was the proviso, "unless you should return to Brassington, and wish to have me with you, when I would be sure to come."

She did not say in her letter why Sarah had left Mrs Leeke, but Mrs Cowper already knew. It was the old story; flirting with the workmen, too much dress, and a tendency to stay out late, in part; but, as Sarah had herself predicted, it was a "bother about the chip money" which had finally caused her to throw up her situation in a huff, and so avoid dismissal.

Mrs Leeke's version of the affair was given with much indignation, but to one who knew anything of Mrs Leeke's character and habits, it was easy to read between the lines.

Leeke's manufactory occupied an exten-

sive block of buildings, in a wide street in Brassington, which was devoted to manufactories of one kind or other. The entrance was through a wide, tunnel-like archway, closed at night with a large pair of gates. The house, which adjoined this passage, was but a small portion of the pile, as it were, a mere scrap in a corner elbowed by the business, which seemed to grudge house room to the family who had made it. The kitchen jutted out from the back of the house, and formed one side of the enclosed yard, through which the workers in wood or iron passed to and from their daily labour. For the girls who worked above stairs, there was another entrance. It was in this yard the refuse wood was thrown, at the foot of two tall trees, that, in their struggle to live, seemed to gasp for breath, and look down in amazement at the growth of brick and mortar, glass and iron, that had covered up and crushed out the green expanse in which they had been planted a century or two before.

It was a busy place; someone always coming and going; and no one was more busy, active, and energetic than Mrs Leeke. She was shrewd, keen at a bargain, "close-fisted," some people said; but that she was *not*. If she saved narrowly, she spent liberally. But she was an eagle-eyed superintendent of the workwomen, who thought her ubiquitous,—a couple of doors in a back bedroom of the house enabling her to make a circuit of the premises at unexpected times.

Coming and going thus, she was in and out of the kitchen as elsewhere, taking in at a glance more than others in a studied inspection,—from the joint before the fire, the rising dough in the bread-pan, the washed or unwashed crockery, the piles of copper on the window ledge, to the diminishing chips in the yard, and the occupation of her handmaid.

There is no question that she was suspicious; most overlookers of workpeople are —their very occupation engenders suspicion; and when she found the kitchen

empty, she naturally gave a keener glance at the window and wood heap; as sharp over the pence as if they had been pounds, as Sarah told her, when they came into collision.

Her frequent absence from the kitchen was first noticed, then objected to.

"I can't be in all places at once," said Sarah. "I was making beds," or "I was at the bakehouse," or "at the mangle," or "sweeping the stairs,"—always a ready excuse, even when found by Mrs Leeke loitering at the gate with one or more of the workmen. In her impatience of rebuke she would clear up and rid off her work with uncommon celerity, to make up for lost time; but breakage was often the result, and the consequent displeasure of her mistress.

More than once it struck Mrs Leeke that the firewood diminished faster than the piles of coin increased, and calling Sarah's attention to this, had been told she hadn't "got the money; people allowed to help themselves might take

more than they reckoned for," and she'd "something else to do than watch them," or "shillings are not as big as pennies, and I've given change," or "Bill Buck paid for his last load with silver;" and the silver being there, this passed. But it so happened that three piles of copper were in the window when Mrs Leeke was in the kitchen at four o'clock in the afternoon, and when she came through an hour later for her tea the tray was set, but neither tea nor toast ready, Sarah was not within hail, and two of the three piles of copper had disappeared.

No silver had taken their place, and there could be no mistake this time.

Sarah was found, not as usual in the gateway, but propping up the post of the house door, in converse with "a stamper" from the next workshop, with her back towards the gateway, so that anyone might come in or go out unobserved.

There was no doubt that the unwatched piles of copper had proved too great a temptation to some one of the ragged

urchins who had come for "a basket of chips," and as little doubt that frequent pilfering had gone on before in Sarah's absence.

Sarah was always ready with an excuse.

"The tailor's boy brought home master's suit of clothes. I was bound to go to the door when he knocked. I wasn't away three minutes."

"You were away twenty minutes," said her mistress; "and you might have kept your eye on the gateway to see who came in."

"I haven't eyes in the back of my head, like some folk," was the impertinent answer, "and I haven't a pair to leave in the kitchen whilst I go out of it, and I should like to know how my work would get done if I never left it."

"There's a time for everything," said Mrs Leeke.

"Ay, and a place for everything; and I don't think the place for that money's the window-ledge, tempting poor folk who come to pay pennies for chips you'd give

'em, if you wasn't as keen over a penny as over a pound. Father never charges poor folk for a sup of milk or a bundle of sticks, bad as he is. And I'm not going to stay where money is left about for light fingers to lay hold on, and me expected to keep count, so you'd best suit yourselves."

"I will suit myself, you impudent baggage, and you may think yourself well off I don't send for a policeman and give you in charge, for this is not the first time the money has gone, and how am I to be sure you had not gone to the front door as a cloak?"

Sarah stood aghast—that her honesty could be impugned had not occurred to her.

Fortunately her master had come in for his tea during the altercation, and he put in a word, arguing for the girl, that the window-ledge was no safe place for coin whilst the door was left open; that it was a temptation to the poor, and that he did not question her honesty; but he agreed with his wife that Sarah was too ready

with her tongue, too negligent of that which was left in her charge, and that for *her own sake* she would be best in a place where there were fewer men about to waste her time with, to her own discredit.

It was not a good character to leave a second place with; for, though no allegation of theft had been made, doubt there certainly was, and a loud-voiced altercation carried on with open doors must float like drift to the passers-by.

She did not readily obtain a fresh situation, and, when she did, threw it up as too dull. There was no young family, no other servant as a companion; her mistress never entered the kitchen, or held any communication with her respecting aught but her domestic duties. There was little company, and Sarah, who cared neither for books nor needlework, missed the life and excitement of the manufacturer's open kitchen. She was on the look-out for a fresh place, when she received her summons home.

Three more years went by, during which

the Cowpers remained in London; and then, the railway being completed, they returned to Brassington.

Strangely enough, they became near neighbours of Mrs Price, who still lived at Laburnum Villa, and, according to Mrs Amory, changed her servants every month or two. This she heard when applying to the civil confectioner to recommend a nurse for her two children.

The Cowpers had not been long settled in their new residence when Mrs Cowper chanced to meet Mrs Price at the house of an old and familiar friend, a Mrs Fielding —a woman of advanced years and of benevolent heart and aspect.

They were not on ceremonious terms; and when Mrs Cowper entered the drawing-room unannounced, Mrs Price was holding forth on the subject of servantdom, and animadverting on the conduct of the class in general, her own "plagues" in particular.

Mrs Cowper would have retired, but at a sign from her friend took a seat, and

listened whilst Mrs Price detailed the insolence of a maid under whose abrupt "warning" she was then smarting. She had come to Mrs Fielding for consolation and advice.

If she did not get the former she got the latter, and from a little-looked-for quarter.

Some years had gone by since the "woman in the grey woollen shawl" had called upon her; she did not recognise Mrs Cowper in her fashionable light summer costume, and she was so engrossed in her subject that the entrance of a stranger scarcely served as an interruption.

It was rather a shock to her nerves when the stranger broke in upon her tirade with,—

"Pardon me, Mrs Price, if I venture to dispute your position, and to hold that 'servants, *as a rule*, are pretty much what their mistresses make them.' There are exceptions, of course—strong exceptions; but, I say, *as a rule*, and I do not speak without experience. My mother, and my

mother's mother, kept their domestics for long numbers of years, unless they married and went away to homes of their own, and even when married they were not lost sight of, and still retained an affection for the family in which they had been trained. And why should we, in this generation, have more difficulty in binding our domestics to us? Have you tried it? I have. I have even tried with success and non-success the waifs from a London Night Refuge. I had a terrible experience with one or two pilferers and confirmed drunkards; but I persevered, and by the power of kindness and patience I happily restored two good members to society; one went to another service and kept it respectably; the other, a high-spirited woman on the verge of desperation and suicide, remained with me until she married honourably an upright man. A little kindness, a little forbearance, and some womanly sympathy were all that was needed to save two human lives—it may be, save two *souls*. I was well served, and they were well saved."

"Oh, my husband would never have such wretches in his house; he is so *very* particular," jerked out Mrs Price.

"So I am aware. Did you ever find a quantity of soda and blacklead on a shelf after a girl named Bessy Birch quitted you to serve 'a woman in a grey woollen shawl?'"

"Yes, the impertinent huzzy! I told her to use them for the paint and the fire-grates."

"The maid, madam, was wiser and more economical than her mistress," said Mrs Cowper, very quietly; "*she* knew that soda destroys paint, and that too much blacklead clogs the stoves and refuses to polish. She produced a better effect at less cost of labour and material, and, let me tell you, for your information, that no better or more faithful servant ever entered a family than that young woman of whom *you*, Mrs Price, gave so indifferent a character to *me*."

"You!" exclaimed Mrs Price, her eyelids raised in amazement.

"Yes, to me. And perhaps I may as well add that her companion Ann is in my service now."

"Humph!" But Mrs Price was not to be put down. "Then, good as Bessy was, you must have parted with her, for you said you only kept one servant."

Mrs Cowper smiled.

"You have a good memory, madam; I did say so, but I have occasion for a second maid now. Yet I had to part with Bessy, and did it most reluctantly, for 'the woman had not had enough of her.' She, who was said to be 'anything but fond of children,' made a pet of my child, and shared with me the anxious watching and nursing of the darling in her last illness, gave us love-service, night and day. She watched by me, too, Mrs Price, when I broke down after it. Need I say that when we removed to London, Bessy accompanied us, or that we valued and trusted her. Her father's sudden death, by his own hand, necessitated her return home. She left with a promise to return

to me if ever we came back to Brassington."

"But she did not, I suppose!" with a slight sneer.

"I returned in May, and wrote to her at once. A very hearty and pleasant letter came back in answer. She would have come to me with the greatest pleasure, she said, but an old sweetheart, having a large sheep-farm in Australia, had come back to England for *her*. They had been married in March, and were on the point of sailing. Her mother and sister were going out with them. It was a most affectionate letter, Mrs Price; I should like you to see it. It might show you how invaluable a treasure you had in your own keeping, and flung away. Flung away, too, with reckless disregard what became of it. And perhaps it might convince you that servants have hearts as well as hands, and that servitude is often as much a matter of feeling as wages. A mistress is responsible before God for the well-being of her domestics, and a good mistress makes a good maid."

Mrs Fielding here broke in.

"I am glad to hear you say so, my dear; so many mistresses now-a-days ignore their own responsibilities. They expect everything from their domestics—render nothing; nothing, that is, but what is in the bond—wages, shelter, food; but of motherly care and supervision, or interest in their well-being, their joys and their sorrows, nothing, literally nothing. A case in point. The very sister of your Bessy Birch was recommended to me by sensible Mrs Amory, as a good servant, but a silly girl, likely to drift to destruction if not upheld by a firm, kind hand. I took her with a character that might have deterred me. I found that she had been left to her own guidance in a great measure, had been in service where, so long as she did the prescribed work, no care for the welfare of her soul or body, for her comfort or rational recreation was shown. She was thrown among shopmen and workmen, yet forbidden to hold converse with one or the other, or to have a sweetheart to visit

her. She was fond of gay colours, but was forbidden to wear them. All the beauty was taken out of her life, and her temper grew *ugly*. I had some trouble with her at first, but I won her heart with a pretty kerchief, and I was soon her best friend. A very different girl is the Sarah Birch who has gone to Australia with her worthy sister, Mrs Ashtead, and the one for whom Mrs Amory bespoke my good offices. She quite repaid my care with her zeal in my service. Yes, Mrs Price, you may take an old woman's word for it, kindly consideration for your dependants is a good and safe investment, if it is nothing more."

"Oh!" cried Mrs Price, who did not relish the rebuke, "there are servants *and* servants!"

"Ay, and there are mistresses and *mistresses*," was the pointed rejoinder of the elder lady.

Mrs Price was answered.

THE FIRST STRAW HAT.

CHAPTER I.

THE BONE-LACE COLLAR.

IN the broad seat of the mullioned window of her Aunt Dorothy's living-room, or "house," sat Isabel Raine, with a cushion on her lap. The cushion was stuck full of small, upright pins, not here and there at random, but with method, as guides for an ingenious device, to form which the worker was laying or twining amongst them, first one and then another of the many fine linen

threads, separately wound on small bone bobbins, which hung suspended over the sides of the cushion, and which changed places with every turn of her deft and slender fingers.

The window-seat, which likewise did duty as a locker, served to fill up the recess formed by the thick stone walls, and she occupied it, with her back supported by the wall and her limbs extended along the seat beneath the window. Thus the light fell through the small leaded panes, fully upon the cushion on her lap, and the casement between the two stone mullions being thrown open and hooked back on account of the heat, she had a clear view before her whenever she chanced to raise her head from her delicate work.

It was not a very extensive view ; a high bank, golden with gorse, was the limit across the narrow road and intervening forecourt ; but as she was seated, Isabel could see, not only the flower-beds and the gate of the cultivated court, and the bee-hives against the farthest wall, but over

that low boundary wall of uncemented stone she could look down the dusty lane on chance passers-by, though even then a clump of envious trees and bushes blocked the view and shut out the stone stile and the footpath through the fields. And, perhaps, had the hollyhocks and sunflowers not been so tall, her range of vision might have been wider.

Her back was turned to the farmyard gate, as if she had no interest in sheep-folds or cattle-sheds, stacks or granaries, heard no music in the clinking of cans or the clucking of poultry, or in the voices which at times were wafted thence through the open casement along with the hum of the bees and the perfume of flowers and aromatic herbs, amongst which those busy workers were so busy.

But never a busier bee was there than Isabel Raine, for though her dark grey eyes did cast a glance now and again up the road, there was no pause in her work; the bone bobbins were lifted and shifted, the threads were carried between and about

the pins, and the lace grew under her skilful manipulation.

In those days, when Charles the First sat on his most uneasy throne, fashions were as various as the opinions of the people, and many were the gradations between courtly extravagances in attire and the primness of the Puritans.

Though an orphan in the care of Dame Dorothea Sibley, Isabel Raine was well provided for, and would carry a nice little dowry to the man so fortunate as to win her; but she had not encased her graceful throat in a stiffly-starched ruff, or distended her skirts with an unsightly farthingale, and she kept silks and satins for holiday wear. Tightly fitting were sleeves and bodice, full and ample the folds of the glossy, murrey-coloured, open, linen skirt, and of the lighter-tinted under one; snowy white the lawn of the coif which imprisoned her raven tresses, of the cuffs at her wrists, of the collar or kerchief which modestly covered her neck, and met in a point on her bodice, and of the long apron which

fell almost to the edge of her gown. But a bow of pink ribbon as a breast-knot, and an edging of the new bone-lace * on coif, collar, cuffs, and apron asserted the maiden's claim to something of gentility, if they did not indicate a desire to look attractive in someone's eyes. Whose? was an undecided question, though her Aunt Dorothy had a shrewd guess.

She, the widow of a well-to-do Yorkshire yeoman, who carried on the farm for her two sons, or rather helped her eldest son to carry it on, was even then debating the point in her cool buttery, which, situated in a side gable, overlooked a field-path on the north, beyond their own boundary wall.

She had a basket, covered with a fair homespun linen cloth, before her on the stone table under the lattice window, into which she was counting eggs for the Leeds market. The clear notes of a well-toned

* Called bone-lace from the pins and bobbins of bone used in its manufacture, and, at a later period, known as cushion-lace.

voice came ringing through the air, and Dorothy Sibley lost the count of her eggs.

> "Who is Sylvia? What is she
> That all swains commend her?
> Holy, fair, and wise is she;
> The heavens such grace did lend her
> That she might admirèd be."

Well did the good dame know the voice of the singer, and well did she know the smart doublet and hose, and the turned-up hat, with feather and broad-laced band, of handsome Master Denton, drawing nearer with every line of the ditty, and anon visible from the lattice as he trod the field-path towards the stile with a firm, free step, and an easy, not to say assured gait, his sword swinging at his side.

"Ay, there he goes, singing his play-house songs! I marvel what the wench sees in him? He's not fit to hold the candle to our Rube. He may have gathered a few courtly airs and graces on his travels, but it's much to me if he has not gathered more ill than good."

So saying, she left her eggs behind in the buttery, and marched off to the "house," her white pinners flapping as she went, and barely waited to reach the door before she cried out, in a tone of displeasure,—

"Here's that Dick Denton again. It's quite time that thou made a choice among thy wooers, Isabel; and the sooner thou sends that springald about his business the better. If he would look after the land his father left him, like our Rube, instead of singing and swaggering about, I'd say naught in his disfavour. But Rube says he'll not have him coming to the farm at all times and seasons."

"Ay, Rube says. It is always Rube!" answered Isabel, looking up from her work. "Master Denton's father was my father's fast friend, and to the last my father had a hearty welcome for the son."

"Ah!" exclaimed the dame, smoothing down her linen apron; "but Master Denton has changed, and not for the better, since he became his own master. But I'll neither make nor mar. I only say it's

time thou made up thy mind, between one or t'other."

"I shall have made up my mind when I have finished this bone-lace collar."

"Bone-lace! What has that to do with— But here he comes."

And the dame bustled back to the buttery, not in the most amiable of moods, though, to do her justice, she meant well by the maiden in her charge, and was anything but a meddlesome or ill-tempered woman.

> "Is she kind as she is fair?
> For beauty lives with kindness;
> Love doth to her eyes repair
> To help him in his blindness."

The song had heralded the singer without the aid of Dame Sibley, and the eyes uplifted from the cushion during the foregoing colloquy could not fail to see the gentleman as he emerged from the screen of bushes and came along the lane towards the gate with the ease of one sure of his welcome.

What had her aunt said that caused

Isabel's head to droop over her work again, as if in deep consideration? Was she asking herself if the change noted by the dame was a change for the worse or better? It was a question that needed thinking out.

The latch clicked, her head raised, the song stopped abruptly, the gold-laced hat was doffed with the grace of a courtier, the "Good-morrow, Mistress Isabel, how fare you?" came through the open casement sweetly as the song, and in another minute Master Denton stood with her hand in his, on the rush-strewn floor of the house—and thinking was postponed.

The cushion, with its unfinished lace, had gone abruptly into the window-seat locker.

"Where is Penelope's web?" asked he, looking round; "is it not yet complete?"

He had seen her bending over it as he came up the lane.

"Not yet," she answered, seating herself in a straight-backed oaken chair, as a

hint for him to do the same. "I am weaving the hopes and expectations of a life into the lace; it is not to be hurried over lightly. Patience and thought and care need accompany every change of the bobbins; else the pattern may be marred."

And it was clear she spoke with a double meaning.

"More than one life hangs on your threads, fair Mistress Isabel; and it is cruel to keep true love so long unanswered. But, methinks Dame Sibley has sharp ears beneath her pinners, and that I would say to thee should reach no ears but thine. Prithee, put on thy dainty hood to guard thee from the kisses of the sun, and come with me for a stroll by the cool waters of the beck for half-an-hour."

There was a momentary hesitation, and then the maiden's French hood, which covered head and shoulders both, was reached from a peg, and the heavy door stood open, when in bustled Dame Sibley once more.

"Here, Isabel, if thou'rt going through the garth, thou might as well take the buttermilk and leavenbread to Rube and the shearers. It's ill going with empty hands."

So saying she mounted on the long settle which stretched far into the room from the open fireplace (where a wood fire was smouldering on the open hearth), and, reaching a quantity of dried oat-cake from the bread-fleak, or rack, suspended from the ceiling, she filled a wicker basket and handed it to her niece along with an earthen pitcher of milk, of which Master Denton at once possessed himself.

"Nay, nay, Dame Sibley, let me be the bearer. Methinks, Mistress Raine's hands are not formed for heavy burdens, though, sooth to say, I rarely see them either empty or idle."

"That's as folk think, Master Denton. If those same hands have never a heavier burden than a gallon of buttermilk, she may think well; and, to my mind, they might as well be empty as filled with the

vanity of fashioning bone-lace. She has set half the girls in Beeston agog with their bobbins and cushions."

"Nay, good aunt, I only taught lame Elspeth, and humpbacked Barbara; and thou knowest the others took it up because the Leeds mercers paid so fair a price for their work."

"Well, well! thou hast ever thy answer ready; and if our courtly dames and gallants must bedeck themselves with bone-lace and Venice-point, it's as well the price thereof should come to Beeston as go to foreign parts. And now be off, and see ye loiter not on your way to the sheep-wash."

She saw them pass through a narrow gap in the wall (formed by two upright stones, and called a stile) to the garth, or farmyard, and, when they were out of sight, turned back from the door; then replaced against the whitewashed wall the tall chair Master Denton had disarranged, and, taking a survey of the ample apartment, with its rudely-carved oaken settle,

its huge coffer, high-backed chairs, and big table, its rafters and its open chimney —where hams and bacon and salted beef, cured and curing, hung suspended—she muttered to herself, with a well-satisfied shake of her shrewd head.

"Isabel may go farther and fare worse. Master Denton may have silver flagons on his buffet, and so may Master Hodgson; and they may carry swords in their belts, and have lackeys to wait on them, and our Rube may be only an honest, God-fearing man, putting his own hands to the plough on his own lands, and wife of his must not give her time to lace and gew-gaws; but I know which house stands the firmest, and where the wife would have the surest peace and comfort. The silver may melt, the lackey grow saucy, the sword cut its wearer, and the wife sit solitary in her satin gown; but godliness and honest thrift make a warm fireside, and brother Raine's girl would find our Rube true and steadfast, though he be not scented like a civet."

He certainly was not at that moment, and Dame Sibley's wisdom was at fault when she sent her niece, in company with Master Denton, to see Reuben among his sheep-washers and shearers.

CHAPTER II.

PLAITING RUSHES AS SHE STRAYS.

BEESTON—the Yorkshire Beeston—is now merely a suburb of Leeds, with omnibuses plying to and fro, and rows of modern houses thrusting their more ancient fellows into the background. Yet in 1630, though it presumed to call itself a town, it was nothing more than a long irregular village straggling up the side of a steep green hill along the line of the rude pack-horse or waggon way, which did duty for a high road between Huddersfield and Leeds. Still, it had its Old Hall, its New Hall, its chapel (in the parish of Leeds), and at one

time, an abbey or friary had crowned the well-wooded steep. But some ruthless destroyer had demolished the abbey, and its very ruins were rapidly disappearing. For, though most of the dwellings thereabouts were of the many-gabled timber-and-rubble order, with roofs of thatch, more than one thriftily-disposed individual had availed himself of the loose masonry, ready hewn to his hand, and built for himself and his descendants a dwelling of solid stone at a cheap rate.

Such, indeed, had been the construction of the irregular homestead of the Sibleys, which was situated almost at the foot of the hill, and at no great distance from a sparkling beck which drained the higher lands as it took its winding way towards the river Aire and Leeds, nearly two miles away.

Advantage had been taken of this running stream to feed a cattle-pond or sheep-wash in the corner of a field on the Stonehouse Farm. It was not absolutely necessary to pass this sheep-wash on the way from the house to the cool and umbra-

geous path by the beck side, but Dame Sibley had resolved to make it so for her niece and her gay wooer.

She had no mind that Isabel should stroll away with Master Denton, unknown to her son or unseen by him, and he was down at the wash, sheep-shearing with his men. She little thought how Rube's towsled auburn hair, his coarse, homespun smock-frock (that relic of Saxon ancestors), rolled up above the elbows to leave his brawny arms bare and free, would contrast with the fine linen, the scented curls, the superfine cloth doublet, slashed and puffed with satin, the lace-trimmed nether garments, loose as the open boots, the graceful hat with its fancy band, to say nothing of the other's handsome face, and the well-trimmed beard, peaked in the newest mode.

If she did so think, it was not as a young girl reared daintily, but as a mother who thought her son superior to the world, and as a farmer who saw in his occupation a guarantee that he would work hard for wife and home.

As Isabel and her companion crossed the pasture with basket and pitcher, Reuben had a great ram by the horns, whilst his shepherd held it by the tail and wool, so strongly it resisted their efforts to souse and cleanse it in the wash; other sheep scampered about the field, shaking the water from their shaggy sides, others bleated piteously in sympathy or anticipation, one lay in the lap of a shearer, and three or four, bare and bald and white, seemed lost in perplexity at their own lightness.

'Twas a pretty rural scene taken altogether, but Reuben, with his hot and grimy face, his muddy boots, his wet and greasy smock, was no more presentable than his dirty and bedrabbled shepherd; and when the resentful ram escaped from their hands to dry his fleece in a race over the grassy slope, and he had leisure to observe who approached, the expression of his face did not improve it. He turned to Isabel.

"Was there never a maid in the house, that the mother should press thee and

Master Denton into our service? Rough pitchers are not for soft hands to bear." And the lip that said it had a curl as of contempt for such soft hands. "Natheless," Rube added, "I thank you, Master Denton, and my kinswoman likewise."

"Nay, thank not me, good sir," replied the other, whose handsome countenance held something like a mocking sneer; "I but relieved fair Mistress Raine of a burthen. I rendered service to Phillis, not to Corydon. And sooth to say, earthenware pitchers do best suit horny hands."

In his very affectation he had turned Reuben's remark upon himself; but if the truth were told, the carrying of the rude, red pitcher had chafed his spirit more than his soft hands. He was too gallant to suffer Isabel to bear it, but had no mind to play lackey to boors—and as such he mentally classed the young farmer with his men.

Meanwhile Reuben had plunged his hands in the sheep-wash, dried them roughly on his smock, taken a portion of

the oatcake and cheese from the basket, and passed the remainder to his men, raised the great pitcher to his lips, and, after a long draught at the buttermilk, passed that on also : so little ceremony was there observed under such circumstances.

It was well honest Reuben did not see the expression of disgust on Richard Denton's face as the pitcher went to his lips. He was spared *one* twinge of pain ; but that would have mattered little ; it cost him so much to see his cousin stroll away with him under shadow of the trees, and to feel how inefficient were any words of his to detain her by his own side.

It is true she looked back with a smile and a nod that at any other time would have set his heart dancing ; but he never before had been taken at such a disadvantage—never before had felt the superior personal attractions of his rival.

"What possessed my mother to send that fopling hither with Isabel? He so trim, and neat, and dainty, and I as rough as Giles or Dan! Beshrew me, but she's

done me an ill turn now, unwittingly. What word could our Isabel spare for me with that gallant by her side, though she knows I would lay my very life at her feet? Young damsels rarely look below the surface, and what knoweth she of Master Denton's life whilst in London, that pit of godless iniquity? He was a brave comrade at the butts or at football when a lad, but he cometh not back from the town the staid and guileless youth he went, and I fear me his gauds and his glozing tongue are even now beguiling the senses of the unsuspecting maiden. *My* chance is gone!"

A desponding sigh spoke for the sadness of his ruminations, as his eyes followed the hood and kirtle whose owner was so dear to him, until the last glimpse was lost amidst the brambles and other underwood, and he turned again to his sheep-shearing with a heavy heart.

He was about right. If his last chance was not gone, it was going.

Pretty Mistress Raine had been daintily

reared in the house of her father, the Leeds notary, and much as she valued her cousin Reuben, she could not shut her eyes to the homeliness, not to say the roughness, of his habits and pursuits. But she had never before seen him to such utter disadvantage.

The jealous sparring of the two men had pointed the contrast between them. She saw that they mutually despised each other, and Master Denton threw a feather or two into the wavering balance of her mind as he saw her look back thoughtfully once or twice. The shafts of his ridicule were light as the thistledown floating in the air, but not the less potent for that.

"By my troth, a delicate Corydon for an enamoured Phillis," he remarked, lightly, as if to himself. "A rare shepherd swain for a poet's madrigal! Could munch oatcake and quaff buttermilk before the nymph he adores, with barely the ceremony of washen hands, good lack!"

Then his musical voice sang out the opening of an old Yorkshire ballad,—

"The childe had wonned* in the wood,
He knew neither evil nor good,
The king himself understood,
He was a wild man."

Hitherto Isabel had strayed along in silence, plaiting and unplaiting rushes idly gathered by the sheep-wash, the subtle sarcasm filling her ears and brain with impressions to which she could have given no name. At last she said a word in his defence.

"Reuben may be rough, Master Denton, but he is not the wild man, and he knows evil from good."

He drew nearer and bent his head.

"Too rough for so dainty a Phillis as Isabel to spend her life with. Think you this busy little hand was ever meant to carry pitchers of milk or maunds† of bread to clowns?" and he took possession of it as he spoke. "I question not the honest yeoman's fitness for his calling, but I hold him unfit to mate with such a one as thee. The thriftiness which lowers a master to

* Lived.

† *Maund*—a basket.

the level of his meanest hind may have no taint of greed. I say not that it has," he added, as he saw her start, "and I would be loth to do Farmer Sibley injustice in my own anxiety to win the hand he craves."

Much more he said during that ramble by the beck and over the hill, his own high appreciation of herself being expressed as much in his fear lest she should be sacrificed to a man of coarse and uncongenial habits, as in any over-eager pressing of his own claims to her regard.

And she had listened musingly, seldom putting in an interrupting word, seemingly as intent on the gambols of a pair of azure-blue butterflies, or on the braid of plaited rushes, as on the conversation of her handsome suitor.

Yet when he was allowed to raise her hand to his lips on quitting her at the Stonehouse gate, he was conscious he had made an impression, and was the more willing to bide the completion of the bone-

lace collar, knowing that it was designed to adorn the man of her choice.

Crossing the garth with his arms full of fleeces, Reuben witnessed his gallant leave-taking with bitterness of spirit. Flinging down his load, he bade Giles, similarly laden, to bear all to the loft, and hastening into the house by a side door, forgetful alike of his grimy face, his unshorn beard, his miry boots, his greasy smock, he confronted Isabel angrily ere she had loosened the strings of her hood.

His jealousy had got the better of his prudence, and he straightway began to upbraid her for encouraging the approaches of Master Denton, as an idle and thriftless coxcomb, who would neither earn nor spare.

"You forget, in your ungenerous haste to traduce a rival, that Master Denton is under no necessity to earn, and is too generous to spare," answered Isabel loftily. "And for his coxcombry, forsooth, I hold his attire to be more seemly and befitting his station than the unsavoury garments

my farming kinsman thinks it no shame to come before me in."

Her words stung, but instead of apology, he retorted:—"A farmer, who would live by his farm, must not be ashamed to soil his hands, or to suit his garb to his occupation; and she who prefers a false-hearted spendthrift in a silken doublet to a true-hearted worker, who may chance to wear a smock, is like to rue her choice in the long run."

"Cousin Reuben, your temper outruns your modesty. A true man would scarcely overpraise himself, or malign another."

She left the room as she said this, and he flung himself on the settle, dropping his head in his hand despairingly.

His mother had been a listener.

"Marry! but thy hot tongue has settled thy business, now, Rube. Neither Isabel nor her broad pieces will come into thy honest hands."

"I care not for her gold, mother. And if her choice had fallen on Master Hodgson, or any godly man, I could have borne

disappointment. But I cannot see her fling her life away in silence."

He had, however, settled the business, as his mother said.

Before another week came round, Master Denton wore an elaborate bone-lace Vandyke collar wrought by Mistress Raine's fair hand, the hand of which it was a pledge and a forerunner.

CHAPTER III.

"WOOED AND MARRIED AND A'."

WHEN Reuben Sibley's grandsire made free with the masonry of the ruined abbey and built him a substantial house in lieu of the tumbledown, chimneyless, thatched cottage of timber, mud, and wattle which had served his farming predecessors for generations, the home of the Dentons stood fair to view, higher up the hill, back from the primitive trackway—a picturesque, black-and-white house, with sundry pinnacled gables, and two stories above the ground-floor, each overhanging the other. Stables and other offices lay in the rear. It was

strongly built, with solid beams of oak cut from the woods around ; nay, it had more than one supporting pillar deeply rooted in the soil, and the cross-timbers were not only quaintly carved, but the spaces between were filled in with plaster and rubble that would shame the tricksy builders of these days.

Save in the hall and the chamber above it, the windows were small and lattice-paned, with never a hinge or a slide for opening to admit fresh air. Mayhap the air around was then too pure to suggest the necessity. The chimneys were so capacious that the occupiers of seats in the ingle-nook on either side the open hearth might see the sun looking down, or the stars, when night had fallen. The chief rooms were wainscoted, but that woodwork had been added since its erection in the early days of Henry VIII., as had also the wooden screen or spear, which ran from the main entrance half across the lower end of the great hall, for privacy and protection from rude winds.

Then the furniture was of oak, and massive; elaborately rather than delicately carved; indeed, the legs of some of the older chairs and tables were, to say the least, clumpy. As Dame Sibley had said, there was plate upon the buffet: the great antique silver salt-cellar was flanked by a pair of branching candle-sticks and a couple of fine flagons; but the floor was carpeted with rushes, and only in the two chief apartments did a curtain keep intrusive sunbeams at bay; so primitive was the house in which Richard Denton had been reared, though its owners had counted themselves second only to the Beestons of the Hall.

And such was the house to which Master Denton's domestics were giving a most unwonted scrubbing and polishing for the reception of his bride, even furbishing up the old arms and hunting trophies which decorated the walls, in lieu of pictures; a house in many respects superior to that of her aunt and cousin.

But Master Denton, who had indeed

brought with him from London other notions besides a love of gay apparel, decided that more was needed to fit Beeston Place for the bonny bride he had won. So he mounted his roan mare and was off to Leeds; and after cheapening and chaffering at the booths of mercers and other dealers in the Briggate (a proceeding which served as an excuse for spending a merry night or two in the town), a string of packhorses and men took their way through Hunslet, and up the steep sides of Beeston-hill, laden with plenishing for the old house—new-fangled luxuries which had made no small inroad into Master Richard's purse.

There were damask hangings for the best bed, the oaken posts of which were thick as a lady's waist. There was a mirror of Venetian glass,* in which the coming bride might see to busk herself; there was a carpet of the new English manufacture—not for the floor, but the

* There was no attempt to make English glass mirrors until 1631.

table; there were platters and dishes of pewter, to supersede the ordinary wooden ware; buck-handled knives from Sheffield; and a few silver spoons, to take the place of the old latten* ones at table; there were bowls and ewers of Staffordshire earthenware, a new set of polished drinking-horns, and, moreover, a couple of daintily-engraved glasses for state occasions.

The introduction of so many novelties and luxuries into the house of Richard's forefathers became the talk of all Beeston, from the hall to the meanest mud hut; and the comments were as various as the people who made them.

Dame Sibley be sure had her say. As her gossips on the way from church fed her ears with descriptions of gorgeous importations of which she had scarcely a conception, the contrast between the home her Reuben had offered to Isabel, and that which Master Denton was so lavishly preparing, smote her with a sharp edge.

* Brass.

"Has Master Denton found a pot of gold that he pours his broad pieces out so freely? Surely the home that was good enough for his good mother might be good enough for his wife!" was her cry of indignant irritation. "The pot that boils so fast is like to boil over."

"Isbel," said Reuben to her, as she was preparing her own wedding garments, and he said it with so much grave earnestness that she could not doubt his sincerity—"Isbel, when Master Denton came wooing to you with songs and smiles and courtly phrases, and with a fine house to offer you, I thought of my own roughness and unworthiness, and did my best to bear my disappointment like a man, though it was hard to see him coming hither day by day to the one I held as my own sweetheart. Well, that is past and over; but I cannot let you go to your new life blindfold. In good sooth Master Denton is showing the store he sets by his sweetheart, in the lining of his nest for her; natheless, Isbel, he is spurring his steed too fast, and it will

behove you to lay a hand on the reins when you mount the pillion, or both may be unhorsed and landed in the mire."

Isabel lifted up her eyes from her seam, and though her face was crimson, said, as calmly as she could, "You mean well, cousin, I know. If there be need I will take your advice."

"There is a still greater need," he replied. "It is said that Master Denton only finds his way to church by tracking thy footsteps. It behoves thee the more to keep thy feet in the path of righteousness, and to draw him with thee. I fear me there will be many temptations in thy new life, for Master Denton has friends in Leeds who scoff at godly folk; but, Isbel, resist evil, forsake not the truth, and thou wilt never want a sure friend."

"Methinks, Reuben, thy homily savours of malevolence, and, like thy other advice, is ill-timed. Master Denton is not likely to find favour here," she answered, stiffly, as her needle flew.

"You are right; he is not likely to find

favour here. But I have done," said the stalwart yeoman, who then wore, not a dirty linen smock, but a sober suit of dark grey, fashioned by an itinerant "taylor" from cloth woven by a village "webster," out of yarn spun on their own hearth by his mother's fingers, and from wool their own sheep had supplied.

He was seemly enough in his doublet and hose, Isabel was ready to admit, as her eye followed him from the room, and was an honest, upright man; but he was too ready with his advice and his forebodings of evil, and was not to be compared in any way with her Richard, whose very fondness in providing so bravely for her reception had served to provoke the envy and jealousy of her kindred.

"Aunt Dorothy was ever ready to say that Master Denton wanted my money more than me; but well I wot both she and Reuben count cost and coin more narrowly than he. They love gold for itself, he for what it will bring."

But the bridal festivities, which lasted a

week, were barely over before she began to think those same relatives were not wholly in the wrong.

It was not merely the lavish extravagance, which kept the long table in the hall spread with a continuous feast for all comers, or the display of his new acquisitions, but there were roystering strangers at their board with whom he was needlessly familiar, and from whom she felt constrained to hold aloof, notwithstanding the claims of hospitality, and the duty of a bride to receive her husband's friends with courtesy. The silver flagons and the drinking-horns were filled more frequently than she thought advisable, and she ventured on the third day to suggest as much to Richard.

"Why, sweetheart," said he, with a kiss upon her cheek; "thou wouldst not have me niggardly during our wedding feast? Our friends quaff to thee and me in right good fellowship."

But she somehow liked not their good fellowship; and she observed that neither

her Aunt Dorothy nor Reuben liked it either.

They would fain have left the gay bridal party at the churchyard gate, then a noble stone archway, but for the possible chattering of gossips, and misconstruction ; and it may be, besides, that good Dame Sibley had a little of Eve's curiosity to behold the fine adornments, of which she had heard so much.

They both thought the great dining-table made a goodly show with its array of pewter-platters, with a drinking-horn and a knife beside each, and a fair linen napkin, so needful in the absence of forks ; and the huge joints and pasties attracted less attention than the silver salt-cellar, the flagons, and the two Venetian glasses for the bridegroom and bride.

Yet, reverent, God-fearing people both, with a strong leaven of Puritanism, they were more than once shocked by the levity and profanity of some of the strangers at the board, and longed for an excuse to retire.

An unexpected incident, which cast a sudden gloom over the feast, and checked for a time the flow of mirth, furnished the opportunity.

When appetite was appeased, cakes and confections were handed round by the servitors, and the bridal-cup, a huge two-handled vessel filled with spiced sack, was placed before the bridegroom. From this Richard took the first draught in token of his supremacy, then held it to the lips of his bride that she might sip, as a pledge that she shared his lot.

It should then have passed round the board, from hand to hand and from lip to lip, as a sign of amity and hospitality.

But it so chanced that one of the Venetian glasses had been displaced to make way for this great cup, and in handing the cup to the friend on his right, Master Denton swept the delicate glass from the board. It struck against the arm of his chair, and was shivered to atoms.

It was an age of superstition. Isabel looked aghast, and so did he. A shudder-

ing chill swept through her frame, and seemed to make the circuit of the guests. The cup circulated amidst whispers and speculations on what that mischance might portend.

And whilst Master Denton in his anger cuffed the servant who had simply moved the transparent glass out of harm's way, Isabel quitted her seat, and Dame Dorothy and Reuben rose to depart. What others regarded vaguely as an omen, they spoke of as a sign from God.

A few other sober guests followed their example, and then Richard Denton endeavoured to hide his chagrin and restore mirth by a free circulation of the flagon and bowl.

It was an inauspicious beginning, and not all his passionate devotion to Isabel could make it otherwise.

They had not been married a fortnight before Richard came to her, as she was examining and sorting the stores of household napery for rearrangement and repair, as a good housewife would have

need where careless servants had held sway.

"Sweetheart," said he lightly, "thou hast gold in thy coffer; I prithee let me have thy key. I have outrun my supplies, and have need of a few coins."

"Nay, Richard, the gold is thine now. I will unlock the coffer."

So saying, she knelt down before the bulky chest, which had held the wardrobe of her mother before her, released the lid, then unlocked the inner box at her right hand, designed for the safe custody of valuables in those days when there were no banks or bankers, and displayed three or four well-filled bags of coin.

As he was putting forth his hand to remove the second bag, she remarked: "The gold is safe here; had it not better remain until there is a call for it? That thou hast will sure supply thy immediate needs!"

"Ay, ay, Isabel; but as it beseems not a man to come to his wife for that which is his own, I will e'en take it into my

own charge. But I care not if I leave thee a score or two of the bright angels* for thine own uses."

"A score or two," she thought, as he took a chary handful of the coins from the last bag and held them out to her, "and there are hundreds in each of those bags!" And the caution of Reuben crossed her mind with an icy thrill.

There was another large coffer in the chamber, closed with three great iron clasps and a secret spring. In this she saw the bulk of her dower deposited. Yet though he pressed a kiss on her lips ere he rode off to Leeds that morning, and promised to be back ere nightfall, she had uneasy feelings concerning her husband, not to be so lightly kissed away.

She had plenty to occupy her hands and mind in bringing that ill-regulated household into order, and sunset found her still busy with her maund of napery and her

* A gold coin, value ten shillings, stamped with the impress of an angel on one side and a cross on the other. Last coined in this reign—Charles I.

needle. The golden glow faded from the yellowing beeches, and the stars came out, and she knitted in the gathering gloom, her heart keeping pace with her clicking pins, but no distant hoof-beat fell upon her ear.

Maids and men were sent to their beds in garret or loft, the midnight moon looked in through the lattice, and still she watched and waited in an agony of fear. Roads were dangerous for travellers with well-filled purses in town or country; then men wore swords, and brawls were frequent and fatal.

She paced the rush-strewn floor in terror, picturing her Richard gashed and bleeding in some lonesome lane.

Daylight streaked the sky with amber, a chilly breeze shook the yellow leaves from the beeches, rushed through the oaks, and set her shivering. Soon the birds were twittering, and the servants were astir; and then, when hope had almost died, the roan mare galloped up with her master.

He reeled in the saddle and she thought he must be ill or wounded. She received a shock when he dismounted, and she discovered her mistake, but she uttered no reproach.

That was Isabel Denton's first night-watch—not the last by many a score.

CHAPTER IV.

RESTLESS FINGERS.

FOR a week or two Isabel Denton had a penitent and affectionate husband by her side, who lavished endearments upon her, sang songs in her praise, and said she was the "sweetest dame in Christendom." He, moreover, indulged what he considered a whim of hers, and took a survey of his property and affairs, so as to reduce chaos to order, and calculate means and expenses.

It was not a congenial or satisfactory proceeding. He flung his ciphered calculations among the embers, and paced the sanded floor in irritation, which told

told her what his tongue did not. She was, however, glad to see that he was roused to active superintendence of his small estate, and to the dismissal of one or two superfluous and peculating servants.

The activity was only temporary, the energetic spurt was soon over. He would much rather lounge about, twang a lute, and sing to her as, distaff in hand, she set the spindle dancing on the floor as she spun, or plied needle or knitting-pins, or twined her bobbin-threads among the pins on her lace-cushion.

His idle moods interfered sadly with her personal superintendence of the household, but she rarely gainsaid him when he lacked a companion, as she had always one or other occupations for her hands, even when she sat in the chimney-nook, or by the window-seat, where he lounged, with limbs extended in graceful negligence.

It may be her very industry was a tacit reproach to him, for he would bid her lay her work aside and give her busy fingers

a holiday, or come out for a ramble with him through the woods or over the moor.

Even then he would complain of her "restless fingers" and her habit of plucking reeds and grasses and plaiting them together as she went. So little could he foresee what these same "restless fingers" had in them.

He made his life monotonous, and found it empty.

His only remedy was the entertainment of free-and-easy friends, who made the rafters ring and his money fly; or a gallop to Leeds, whence his return was uncertain. Isabel's protests were disregarded; he laughed at her forethought and frugality, and more than once told her he "would have none of Dame Dorothy's parsimony under the roof of Beech Place."

. . . . . .

And in this wise had ten years flown by; years that had brought to Dame Isabel Denton not only the common cares of motherhood, but more than the common cares of wifehood.

Four living bairns, three girls and a boy, clustered round her knee and looked to her for all they had of pleasure, comfort, instruction—and the time was coming fast when to her they alone could look for support.

Her golden angels had long been gone, melted in the wine-cup, rattled away in the dice-box, bowled away in the fives-court. His father's hoard had gone beforehand; and the oaks and beeches had been felled; the very acres that grew them had changed hands; nothing remained but the old homestead, and a creditor, of whom she knew nothing, was clamouring for that.

Master Denton, or Dick Denton as they called him, had no longer a horse to ride, or servants to do his bidding.

Only one domestic remained. The woman who had been his nurse, and who had helped to nurse his children, a pious old creature named Keturah, who had done much to strengthen the faith and the flagging energy of the over-tried wife.

Long ere the gloss had worn off her wedding-gown had Dame Denton acknow-

ledged to herself the truth of her aunt and cousin's previsions ; but her pride and her affection bound her to keep the knowledge within her own breast. In time, however, her husband's excesses became too flagrant for hiding, and when prudent Reuben became the purchaser of the first field reckless Richard made away with, there was no secret to be kept.

She had endeavoured to conceal the paucity of coin at her own disposal, and the struggles she had to clothe herself and children as befitted their station. It was not until she cut up her own gowns to make frocks for her girls that Dame Dorothy was enlightened ; and shook her white head and pinners* dolefully as they all met and exchanged salutations under the arch of the churchyard lych-gate.

" Alack ! Reuben," she said to her son, on their way home, " I fear matters go but sadly with Isabel and her bairns. Where will she find raiment for them when her

* The loose lappets of the linen cap covering the ears, and long enough to pin under the chin.

own kist is empty? She had better have been contented with thee, homely as thou wert."

"Ay, mother, but I should then have missed my Rachel. She is a good wife and a thrifty, fears God, honours me, loves us all; I am well content. As for Isbel, He who sent the ravens to feed Elijah by the brook Chereth, will care for her whilst she walks in His way and leads her children therein." And there the subject dropped.

The following Sunday, to general surprise, no Dame Denton was seen in the family pew, and she was known to be in good health. Only old Keturah had charge of the children, and she was impenetrable to the questioning of curiosity. But, bribed by a cake of parkin from Dame Dorothy's capacious pockets, her grandnephew let out that "Mother had no hat, father had thrown it on the fire in a passion."

No hat! and no money to buy a new one! Nothing out of which to construct even one of the old-fashioned hoods. What

was Dame Denton to do for a decent head-covering?

To keep her children out of mischief, she had taught them to weave straw and rushes into little baskets. As she pondered the pressing question of new headgear, she chanced to have a few straws in her hand, plaiting them in and out mechanically, as was her habit when in thought. It was a long question, and the plait grew in length as she ruminated. Then she chanced to give the plait a twist round her finger, layer over layer.

An idea struck her suddenly. What would make a pretty basket might make a pretty and serviceable hat!

The newest hats, as worn by the Puritans, were steeple-crowned. Without a word to anyone she twined her long plait round and round, widening gradually as she went on, and securing the folds of plait with thread and needle.

It was not accomplished all at once, but by the end of the week she had a hat to go to church in like a respectable dame. She

had found a ribbon to encircle it, and wore the hat above her pinners as was the wont.

In these days of many fashions, a novel headdress attracts attention. Dame Denton's *straw* hat was too unique to pass unnoticed in those days of change and whim. The ladies at the hall made a journey into Leeds to obtain similar hats for themselves. No one had seen or heard of the new invention. Feminine desire was baffled; feminine curiosity and pertinacity were roused.

The ladies of the New Hall visited once more the long-overlooked mistress of Beech Place to ask obsequiously where Dame Denton procured her beautiful hat.

The inventive dame coloured. She was loth to expose her husband, or the straits which had called that first straw hat into being.

"The invention was a secret," she said; "she believed hers was the only straw hat in England."

A secret! and rare! That which she

had said to silence inquiry, only excited a craving for possession.

"Could not Dame Denton procure the like for them? They cared not for the cost."

"She would endeavour to do so," she replied at length; but they would have to wait a week or two."

Dame Dorothy likewise came bustling up the hill, but she went back little or none the wiser.

Only Keturah was in Dame Denton's confidence, and she was as close as Master Denton's spring-coffer.

The hats were made, and sent to the New Hall by the old nurse, but as a gift. Dame Isabel had not thought of turning her new inventive skill to account, though many a yard of bone-lace had old Keturah already disposed of privately for the straitened mistress of Beech Place.

Mistress Hodgson and the good dame her mother lost no time in parading their straw hats—"the newest mode," being only obtainable as a favour, and through the

medium of the lady who had the very first. The wearers were importuned to use their interest to obtain other straw hats for their friends.

Dame Denton was willing to oblige, but of course "strangers would have to pay." This was understood, and the busy fingers of Isabel were at work late and early, whensoever Master Denton was out of the house, which was pretty nearly altogether.

Orders came in, always with apologies for troubling the good dame, and as her charges were commensurate with the monopoly, she no longer looked with dread to the future.

But the secret did not leak out until Richard Denton's creditor put in his claim for the old homestead and threatened to turn them all out.

Richard blustered, the children cried, but Isabel put on her hat, and hurried down the hill to her old sweetheart and kinsman Reuben, the homely but true-hearted.

To him she laid bare her difficulties. The creditor in the house with a mortgage

over all—her home going. She also revealed that by her own invention of the straw hat she was privately making money, and might herself pay off the mortgage in time, if it were in the hands of a reasonable creditor.

Thrifty Reuben had always money in store, and he had a fund of good Christian principle besides to draw upon.

Back with her he went in his smock-frock, with a bag of gold in his wallet, and whilst Richard Denton sat impotently drivelling and drinking in the chimney nook, Reuben paid off the mortgage and had the deed transferred to himself.

"Now, Isbel," said he, "thou and thy children are sure of a home. No creditor of Master Denton's will have power to drive you forth; and if, as thou sayest, thou hast means to earn a livelihood for thy little ones by a gift thy God has bestowed on thee, do it boldly and openly, have neither shame nor secrecy, nor fear for the result. In the work of thine hands thou

wilt find comfort and honour, and thy children will rise up and call thee blessed."

He said this as he stood on the doorstep whither she had followed him with her grateful thanks.

"But," she replied, hesitatingly, "what about Richard? He will never let me earn the money to keep us if he knew. He would rather fling my work in the fire."

"Would he? Has *he* any means of support remaining?"

"I fear me, no!"

"Then I will break the matter to him. And fear not, Isbel, to pursue the path duty points out to thee."

He went back into the hall, where the children were grouped in a corner, silent and afraid.

"Master Richard, a word with thee outside; I have private matter for thine ear."

Richard, not the jaunty, rollicking Richard of our first acquaintance, but a sort of shabby, secondhand make-believe,

rose from his seat, and, albeit with unsteady gait, followed the sober speaker into the open air. He was not very clear about what had taken place. He had seen good farmer Sibley count out the gold to satisfy his "rapacious creditor" as he called him, but he had a vague idea that Beech Place was his own once more, and that Reuben had done a generous act.

He was not prepared to learn that Reuben was the *de facto* owner of the place, by right of the mortgage, and that he would only be allowed to retain his place there on condition that he so far amended his ways as to permit his worthy dame to pursue her way in quiet.

Reuben had already a private debt against him, and on these conditions he promised to be a lenient creditor, but on the least sign of his interference with the new occupation of his good dame, on which the family would have to depend, he declared he would throw him into gaol for his debt, without remorse, as a duty he owed to others.

This was a sobering exhortation, for Reuben was known to be a man of his word. And between his surprise and his personal fears, Richard gave the required promise.

The promises of such men are as soap bubbles blown by a child.

Dame Denton had taught her two eldest girls to plait the straw. But she could not supply the hats as fast as they were called for. She engaged a young woman as an apprentice, then another, and another, as her trade grew and flourished, and the fashion spread from Beeston and Leeds to the metropolis.

Many were the annoyances she experienced from her dissolute husband, whose idle hands were always too ready to fling the work of her busy ones into the fire; but so long as she found him the means to spend abroad he was rarely seen under his own roof, and for the sake of her growing children she preferred that it should be so.

History is silent respecting his end, but

of Isabel Denton it is still on record in the "Annals of Leeds" that she was the inventor of the *first straw hat*, that she maintained her large family and dissolute husband by the proceeds of her industry and invention; and, though it does not say that she was the first to instruct the girls of Beeston in bone-lace, it does give to her the credit of founding the one other staple trade of the "town," when she invented THE FIRST STRAW HAT for her own wear, and taught the industry to others.

THE OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

CHAPTER I.

FELLOW-STUDENTS.

BETWEEN warlike sieges and academic studies there would seem small connection; and yet to the memorable siege of Leyden in 1574 do the Dutch owe their celebrated university. On May the 20th, in that year, did the Spaniards besiege the city for the second time, offering pardon on condition of immediate surrender. But the tender mercies of the Spaniards were

well known, and the inhabitants resolutely held out. Ay, though, as the weeks and months went by, all that could be eaten was eaten, down to the very dogs and rats, and bony famine stalked through the city with pestilence clinging to its rotting skirts. At length, when the emaciated living had scarcely strength left to bury their dead, the lean and pallid populace came clamouring to Van der Werf the Burgomaster, to give them food or to surrender. The old man, hungry as themselves, stood firm.

"You may eat what is left of me," he cried, "for I have no bread to give; but I will *not* yield up my trust."

Prior to that, two white doves of promise had come fluttering into the city with the news under their wings that the Prince of Orange was sending a flotilla with provisions for their relief; but the waters were low, the wind adverse, and from the tall city tower, or Burg, the boats could be seen in the distance, unable to reach them over the long banks of sand. As a last

resource—for it meant inundation and ruin to the surrounding country—the relieving party cut the dykes. Alas! the waters only rose a few feet, and the boats still could not come in.

It was then that the people, in their hopeless agony, rushed to their brave Burgomaster; and the Spaniards, securely entrenched behind ramparts like bloodhounds in the leash, chuckled as the cry of maddening despair rose from the beleaguered city.

Then, too, as if to prove that "man's extremity was God's opportunity," came a sudden change of wind bringing in the rising tide; then, as the north wind rose to a storm, the billows rushed over the sands higher and higher. In at the opened gates, on the 3d of October, came the welcome flotilla; and over the Spanish ramparts, over the Spanish army, went the waters with a roar. As if to make this deliverance more signal and providential, in three days the wind changed and the waters retired. They had done their ap-

pointed work. The city was delivered, the enemy destroyed.

What the people of Leyden had suffered in those months is not to be told in so slight a sketch. The prince, to mark his sense of their heroism and endurance, offered, in perpetual commemoration, either to remit taxes or to found a university. And to this day Leyden University exists, a monument and testimony to the patient endurance of her ancient citizens, and of their honourable choice.

It boots not here to attempt a calculation of all the learning enshrined within its ancient walls, nor to enumerate the wise and learned men who have come forth from its venerable gates—though our Evelyn and Goldsmith were of the number; for this story of ours concerns a student of later days, one who was neither particularly wise nor overpoweringly learned.

Hendrick Meulin was just one of those average young men who are sent to college to complete their education as a matter of course, not because they have shown any

special desire or aptitude for any one branch of scientific or classic lore, and who might have been kept nearer home to better purpose.

He was an only son, and was content to be so, since he had a monopoly of parental affection, his patrimony was secure without any necessity to labour with head or with hands, and he had neither care nor anxiety for the future.

Stay—one anxiety troubled his breast—the sort of anxiety most men have felt at some period of their lives—he had fallen deeply, desperately in love, and was in as much trouble about the result as one who stood so well with himself could be.

It may be he estimated himself by his inches, and they were not few ; for nature had gifted him with magnificent proportions, and added a handsome face to the fine figure, and an easy bearing which had almost a dash of recklessness in it.

He had certainly a face and figure to attract ; and so thought and said Mynheer Meulin and his good vrouw as they sat in

the *zomerhuis* of their garden near Delft, and talked of him and all he was to achieve, and the great match he would be sure to make, whilst he smoked, and she knitted, and both placidly contemplated the grazing piebald cattle, and the windmills working away to secure the treacherous water in the dykes from devastating their fertile lands.

And so must have thought the Dame Van Sittart, so careful a watch did she keep over her orphan niece Luthera Van der Meyer, whensoever they chanced to take their walks abroad, or when the strips of looking-glass attached to the windows of their town house revealed the approaching form of the young student.

Professors and students many passed and re-passed the large old house with the carved front, which, like a venerable dame disfigured with powder and rouge, had hid its antique beauty behind successive coats of the customary gaudy paint. There were professors and students both, to whom the door was hospitably open, and so it had

been to Hendrick Meulin ; but of late he had a suspicion the hinges grew rusty when he drew near. And, considering that the green door shut him out from the sweetest maiden in all Leyden, the suspicion was not consoling.

The fair-haired, blue-eyed Jonkvrouw Luthera Van der Meyer was not only captivatingly beautiful, but she was also accomplished and rich. It is superfluous to say that Hendrik Meulin was only one of her many admirers ; but he was the one of whom the wary Dame Van Sittart had the most apprehension. She was proud of the homage paid at the shrine of which she was the custodian ; and so long as the devotees bowed at a distance, all was well. But Hendrik Meulin evinced a tendency to approach too near, and Luthera showed no signs of displeasure. Nay, she greeted his coming with a smile, and followed his departure with a sigh.

" This will never do," the old lady said to herself ; " that young man is too engaging, by half. Luthera is just of the age to be

taken with a face and a figure, and to think a man carries his heart in his eyes. Ah, me! I thought so once!" and she sighed as heavily as a damsel of eighteen. "She is too young to distinguish gold from tinsel; and— Well, I don't want the poor child to have my experience. It is best to be careful."

It is doubtful, however, whether the Dame Van Sittart could have put her objections into definite shape, or whether a want of sufficient deference towards herself did not call them into being; or whether there might not be something more potent in the background.

It was at the Church of St Pancras Hendrik first set his eyes on Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer; and it being the custom in the Dutch Church (as it is still in some remote English ones) for the women to sit on one side and the men on the other, she was full in his sight, and I am afraid had more of his attention than had the service.

He had gone there shortly after his arrival in Leyden, as a stranger, partly to

see the building, and the monument therein of the brave old burgomaster, Van der Werff; and, having been haunted all the week by a face unconscious of its own charm and a form like a fabled sylph, he found his way thither the following Sunday to feast his eyes again. A bribe of a couple of gulden obtained her name and that of her companion from Jan, the servant who carried the ladies' foot-stoves to and from the church behind them, and that knowledge seemed to bring her nearer in his thoughts. In reality he was as far away; for though the ladies could not fail to see him, it was but as one of the congregation, though he had a notion the blue eyes began to droop under the gaze of his, as blue as the fair maiden's own.

The season for furs and foot-stoves was gone. The trees along each canal and straat were robed with the delicate green of spring. Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer had thrown aside her winter garb and, more bewitching than ever, turned the young man's head. He was jealous of every man

who raised his hat or stopped to greet them in their walks. The summer sun came down to scorch the red tiles of the pointed roofs, blister the vari-coloured paint on the house-fronts, suck up the sluggish water in the river and the dykes, and dry up the sap of the green leaves. The storks were back and busy on the chimney-tops; but the bird had flown to whose music he had listened week by week.

Luthera's voice had been raised in hymns of praise, without thought of a human hearer; but he had felt as if she sang for him, and he resented her absence as a personal grievance.

In his moodiness he recollected he had gone to Leyden for study, and not for falling in love, and he betook himself to the Lecture Hall, his books, and his papers, to recover lost time prior to the examination,

It was a stiff pull, and he had to thank a fellow-student named Derek Keppel for his help at the last, or he would have failed ignominiously, not for want of talent, but for want of talent's right hand, assiduity.

He told this Derek Keppel it would have broken the hearts of the good couple in Delft if the son of whom they were so proud had not passed. As it was, he went back to his country-home to be loaded with encomiums he knew he did not deserve; but though conscience gave his tongue many a twitch, he never confessed how near he had been to failure, or said a word of the pale-faced student who had sacrificed his own rest and valuable time to pull him through.

In fact, he had more qualms about this self-same Derek Keppel than he cared to own, even to himself.

Derek had no father, and his mother had made sacrifices to give him a liberal education. He had turned his attention to engineering, that most essential study in a land where the engineer plays so important a part in its preservation, and where the science has a recognised and prominent place, if not in the curriculum of its universities, at least in special schools attached thereto.

In the memorable year 1830, when Belgium broke away from Holland, the students of Leyden took up arms, enrolled themselves as a corps, marched to the frontier, distinguished themselves in several encounters, and for three years remained under arms.

Derek Keppel had been one of these. He had gone at his country's call to fight; but he had never forgotten that he was destined for an engineer, or that he was drawing on limited resources; and when others were drinking or smoking or gambling to fill up vacant intervals, he was drawing plans and diagrams, and making calculations, regardless of the ridicule of his idler and lighter-brained companions.

Of these, a reckless young fellow, Ernst Van de Venter, and two others, by name Zwart and Groen, were the most tormenting; and as they marched in the same rank, and were generally quartered together, there was no avoiding them or their rude jests. Many of these were

thrown away upon him, for, as he smoked and studied, his mind became absorbed, and his ears were closed to the shuffling of cards, the rattling of dice, or the sneers of those who smoked, and drank, and gambled the hours away.

Van de Venter, from the lofty eminence of an overflowing purse, looked down with contempt on a scholar who dressed plainly and was neither to be found in theatre or café, and concluded that only the direst poverty could drive Derek Keppel to such self-denial and incessant study. With this idea he had inoculated Zwart and Groen; and that which should have been Derek's protection was taken as an open door for banter and mischief.

And this, not merely whilst the corps remained under arms, but after their return to Leyden; when they and others were still so flushed with the warlike spirit, that they were ever on the alert to provoke quarrels for the extreme satisfaction of settling them at the sword's point.

Many a time had this choice trio burst

into Derek's chambers at midnight, when the cafés were closed, and forced their unwelcome society upon him; and more than once had they carried with them Hendrik, to whom they had attached themselves on his first entrance on the books of the University.

It was not Derek's desire to quarrel with his unwelcome visitors, much as their presence irritated and interrupted him; but it was no uncommon thing to find a page of a thesis he was preparing, or a mathematical problem which had cost him severe thought, torn into strips for a pipe-light or trodden under foot, half-burnt; to say nothing of the confusion into which his papers and letters were thrown. He was not naturally suspicious, but he could not regard these repeated mischances as wholly the result of accident.

He had come back to Leyden with honourable military distinction and an unextracted bullet in his side; and in 1834 was still working almost night and day, to recover lost time, when he so generously

stepped in between Hendrik Meulin and an utter breakdown.

Generously indeed, for he more than suspected the young man of destroying an important memorandum lying on his table; but he also ascribed it to the mischievous instigation of others.

It was the knowledge of this and other practical jokes in which he had taken part at the expense of Derek, that made the sounds of his own praises so uncomfortable to Hendrik, for the first time in his life.

He had neither honestly earned nor deserved them. But he did not own it. Moral cowardice was stronger than courage.

CHAPTER II.

AT FLOOD TIDE.

A CERTAIN class of pottery took its name from Delft; and a certain class, if not so high a class of delf, is still there manufactured; but the thriving trade is of the past, its vitality is at a low ebb, and the quaint old town is as stagnant as its waters and its trade. It was not much more lively in 1834; and Hendrik, who had vegetated there for thirteen years with undisturbed serenity, was, since his brief Leyden experience, in an uncommon hurry to flee from the quiet and monotony still so congenial to the phlegmatic placidity of Myn-

heer his father, and the domesticity of the rotund vrouw his mother. The short-skirted maids, with their inveterate rubbing and scrubbing, clattering of brass pails, sluicing and dashing of water, certainly created a diversion on the Saturday; then Sunday carried them all to church, and though he seemed to have lost his old interest in the slow service, there were friends to salute outside, and the town was less deserted. But, oh, the dreariness of Monday to him!

He had heard the history of every plant and flower in the garden, between the long whiffs of Mynheer's pipe, as they had sauntered lazily round and about the winding walks, he keeping company with a cigar. Or he had smoked and drunk a sober glass of geneva with his father in the zomerhuis, and listened alike to the click-click of the good vrouw's knitting-pins and the accompanying details of all the domestic doings and disasters during his absence, interrupted, it might be, with Mynheer's questionings anent his life in Leyden.

At such times he had found it convenient

to make his escape and stroll away towards the sleepy town, to watch the storks, and the windmills, and the lazy barges on the canals by the way, out of sorts with himself and all his surroundings.

Monday brought matters to a climax. Mynheer Meulin and his vrouw both had exhausted their conversational themes. They expected him to be as circumstantial as themselves in detailing his career and his course of study in Leyden for their behoof. They had reared him steadily, soberly, piously, and had no suspicion that he could have aught to conceal or suppress.

He was on the horns of a dilemma; he had neither the inventive faculty of Van de Venter, nor the lying facility of Zwart, nor the swagger of Groen. He could not make free with the name of Jonkvrouw Luthera Van der Meyer, and excuse idleness on the score of frantic passion for a lady with whom he had never exchanged a word. He could not tell how he spent his hours with his rackety friends; and it taxed his ingenuity to tell a consistent story

of lectures he had never attended, or the remarks of professors whose lectures he had not heard, with even a shadow of truth therein.

As usual, he fidgeted, and, making some excuse, before long was ruminating at a distance from the parental dwelling in the company of a reflective stork, which stood at ease by a dyke side upon one leg, with the other tucked up under its wing.

"Old sage," said he, apostrophising the bird, "are you meditating your domestic and national responsibilities in the worm and insect line, or are you pondering the mysteries of your next migration? If so, I think I'd better tuck one leg up under my arm, and stand on the other, whilst I take counsel with you, Professor Stork. It is quite time I migrated; but whither shall I fly, O bird of thought?"

The bird, with its long neck bent, and its head on one side, might have been listening. Down went the spare leg, out went the wings, and away high up in the air the stork was flying westwards.

"Towards the sea, eh? A good suggestion? I feel inclined to take the hint."

In a few days Hendrik had persuaded the anxious old couple that his restlessness could only be cured by sea-air and sea-bathing, and that he must take them to strengthen him to face the arduous studies of the future; there being for that purpose no spot so salubrious as Scheveningen.

The old fishing village was not so fashionable a watering-place then as now, but it lay between Leyden and the Hague, and was beyond the range of Mynheer's spectacles.

Hendrik did feel some strivings of compunction when the pair, whose only hope on earth he was, accompanied him to the trekschuit, in which he was to make part of the journey, and left him there with blessings and exhortations, a refilled purse, and a wardrobe replenished with linen and hosiery which had occupied the hands and mind of the industrious vrouw during the whole time of his absence. He saw the tears roll down her plump cheeks as she

looked a last farewell when the trekschuit began to move; and he resolved for the twentieth time to keep faith with his confiding parents, and his promise to Derek Keppel.

For not only had the engineering student stepped in between Hendrik and disaster in the Professor's Hall, but he had endeavoured to step in between him and associates who were doing their best, or worst, to destroy all the good there was in the young man, fresh from the country and a quiet life. And if Hendrik did not take the friendly advice as gratefully as he took the "coaching," he knew that it was well meant, and left Derek with a promise to stick to his studies and avoid his alluring associates in the future.

The resolution was strong upon him when he reached Scheveningen; and there he had no temptation to break it. But he was not disposed to saunter alone upon the broad flat sands and listen day by day to the unceasing sermon of the sea. It was his intent to wander through the wood

to the Hague, and round about, peering in through the gates of châteaux and country-seats, in the chance of a glimpse of the vanished but unforgotten Luthera Van der Meyer.

Many a retiring jonkvrouw was abashed at the searching gaze of the fine young man; many a careful father glared at him through the smoke of his long pipe, as he walked leisurely past, or stepped on the plank-bridge across the private dyke, which converted every other dwelling into a "moated grange," and took a close survey of garden and house windows through the gates; but neither at the Hague nor on the road thither came he across even a servant or sign of her for whom he sought.

Returning with his hands in his pockets along the straight road, in most disconsolate mood, to the flat but picturesque seaside village, at the end of a week of disappointment, too dejected even to smoke,—for it is your high-spirited fellows who sink to the lowest depths of despondency,—he became annoyed by the irritating

barking of a little dog that would follow close on his heels, frisk around him, spring upon him, and though more than once admonished by the said heels to retreat, returned again to the charge.

It should have been moonlight, but the sky was about in as cheerful a mood as Hendrik, and the clouds had the best of it. Only now and then did the sombre cumuli let the moon show a clear face. But in one of these glimpses a light shone on the dog, and on the man he persecuted.

The clouds from his face vanished too. "Zeiler! Zeiler!" he cried; and as Sailor answered to the call, the idle hands came from the pockets to one of the hairiest little Scotch terriers that ever was made a pet of. How many biscuits had Hendrik carried in his pockets on the chance of meeting Jan with the dog, and feeding the latter for the sake of his mistress!

If he had no biscuits for "Zeiler" now, neither had he any kicks. He patted the rough head, asked where he had left the pretty jonkvrouw; and when the animal lay

down in the path, and beat its shaggy tail on the grass-bound sand, as if to say it was tired, Hendrik bent his long back and took him up in his arms. He certainly regarded "Zeiler" as Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer's representative.

As the lights of Scheveningen came in sight, a party of shrimpers and short petticoated fishwomen, with white caps and sharp eyes, hailed him with—

"Here he comes! Here's the pretty jonkvrouw's dog!" "Where did you find him, Mynheer?" "Oh, the ladies will be so glad!" "Did you know Jan was seeking him, Mynheer?"

And before he could answer half the questions put to him in different voices, a lad in wide blue woollen breeches ran off as fast as his heavy wooden shoes and Dutch stolidity would permit, past a larger group of people farther along the sands, and on to the lighted hotel a little distance beyond.

As Hendrik approached this group of fisherwomen and others, he became aware

that they surrounded one of those hideous exaggerations of the English hall-porter's black-hooded chair, peculiar to the sea-shore of Scheveningen, and that the Dame Van Sittart was ensconced therein, either to enjoy the sea-air or the pleasure of rebuking Jan, who stood with downcast head before her like a culprit.

"You should have been more careful, Jan," she was saying, "knowing well how much your young lady loved Zeiler for the giver's sake. And what will the Captain say when he returns and hears that she has lost the dog he brought for her across the sea?"

"The Captain!" thought Hendrik, with a jealous pang, as the wind brought the raised voice to his ear, "I wonder who he is?"

But his quick eye had observed a slight girlish figure tripping down the steps of the hotel, and hurrying across the sands, and he had turned to meet her before either Jan or Zeiler had seen each other. Until then the weary little animal had gone com-

fortably to sleep in the arms of his biped friend. All at once he roused, gave a sniff, then a bark of recognition, a restless twist, and, being released, a joyous bounce towards the feet of his recovered mistress.

"Ach! Zeiler, Zeiler, where have you been, my poor pet, all this day?" she said, in her sweet tones, to the frisky animal.

Hendrik had doffed his hat; "Pardon my addressing you, Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer, but Zeiler and I are old friends. I found him, or rather he claimed my acquaintance, among the dunes about two miles away. I am pleased to have been the means of his restoration."

"Ach, Mynheer, I know not how I shall thank you sufficiently! Zeiler" (the dog was by this time in her arms, and as lively as a cricket), "bark your most grateful thanks to Mynheer—" The pause was accompanied by a slight interrogative glance.

"Meulin, Hendrik Meulin, at your service!" was his prompt answer, all in a thrill at the long-wished-for opportunity to exchange speech with her.

The dog's bark had attracted the occupant of the sheltering shore-chair. She joined them at this juncture, and looked from one to the other, and then at the dog; but the light was not strong enough to reveal faces or their expression.

"Aunt, this gentleman, Mynheer Meulin, found Zeiler two miles away, and has carried our treasure home in his arms. Has he not earned our thanks?" And she caressed the rough black head nestling against her soft cheek, so lovingly that one of the trio felt envious.

"Undoubtedly," said the aunt decidedly, though in a lower key than her reprimand of Jan, "and the Captain's thanks also. But I am surprised, Mynheer," and she turned to Hendrik, as they all walked on towards the hotel, "much surprised that the dog would permit a stranger to touch him;" and she looked curiously up at Hendrik, whose form and bearing seemed not unfamiliar to her.

"Oh, Zeiler does not regard me altogether as a stranger, Dame Van Sittart,"

said Hendrik, answering her look and tone, as much as her words; "we two struck up a friendship in Leyden some months ago."

"Indeed!" quoth the elder lady, as if in a fog.

But the lamps of the hotel shone in their faces.

"I think, aunt," suggested Luthera, "we have seen Mynheer Meulin before. At church," she added, as a reminder.

The Dame Van Sittart needed no reminder now they had reached the hotel, and there was light by which she could see for herself. She had the courtesy to invite the young man to enter, but he had the self-restraint to excuse himself, on the plea that it was too late to intrude; and raising his hat again took leave gracefully. It was an act of policy, and had its reward.

"A polite and unassuming young man, that. He did not presume on his service to thrust himself forward, as some do," said the aunt, as she toiled up the steps,

"and not an unworthy one, I should say, he is so regular an attendant at church."

"And did you see how Zeiler jumped out of my arms to his feet, and put up his paw to be shaken before he went? Zeiler is a dog of discrimination;" and the beauty caressed the rough head to which the latter remark was addressed.

"Yes; I would rather trust the dog's instinct than my own discernment. Yet a dog will fall in love with one half of a man's nature sometimes; the other half may be warped, yet not concern him."

"Ach! Zeiler knows better than that. He is a wise dog, is my pet. And Zeiler likes Mynheer Meulin;" and again the rough black head came in for a caress.

From this scrap of a conversation continued by the ladies in their own apartment, it may be seen that Hendrik had made a favourable impression, and that it would be an easy matter for him to make good his introduction without seeming to obtrude.

The sands of a watering-place offer many facilities for cultivating acquaintance. He

had not been so intimate with Van de Venter without learning so much. Then he counted on Zeiler as an ally.

Fifty years ago Parisian fashions had not altogether banished the national costume of the Dutch. Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer still wore the close-fitting cap and hood, the gold ornaments on brow and temples now seen only on those of lower rank, the full skirt of her people; and Hendrik thought she never looked more charming than when he met her on the sands the next morning with Zeiler for a companion. The dog came barking and bounding forward to salute him, scampering backwards and forwards from one to the other as if to re-introduce them.

"Zeiler seems determined I shall not pass you this morning, Mynheer," said the young lady, responding with a smile to Hendrik's bow and simple salutation, at the same time putting forth her hand with characteristic frankness.

Be sure he took it; and though the little gloved palm rested in his but a moment,

there is no saying what wild hopes he did not build thereon. He made inquiries about the Dame Van Sittart's health. She had to ask whereabouts and how Zeiler was found; and somehow the conversation lasted longer than an orthodox "five minutes."

When the morning was well aired, the aunt came on the scene with her niece, and Jan in close attendance. A bathing-machine swallowed up Luthera, and made Hendrik's approach to the dignified yet gracious dame all the easier.

Indeed, she had the art of putting those of whom she approved at their ease directly, and could repel an intruder quite as freezingly. It suited her just at the present to learn something more of the fine-looking young fellow than his name and his seat in church. Was she not left in charge of a charming maiden with as charming a fortune, and would she not have to render an account of her charge when her brother, an officer of high rank in the Dutch fleet, came home from his present cruise? It

behoved her to know to what extent it might be safe to recognise the little service the young man had rendered.

As it happened, it equally suited Hendrik to talk of his parents, of their home, of his only-sonship, and his studentship, as if he had no ulterior object in view.

At all events the Dame Van Sittart was satisfied. He was allowed to make himself agreeable to both ladies; and so well had he improved his opportunity that when they quitted Scheveningen he had an open invitation to the abode of the Van Sittarts in Leyden.

CHAPTER III.

HIS FRIENDS AND HIS ENEMIES.

HENDRIK was elated with his good fortune. He felt he had made an impression which he hoped to deepen ere long, though his jealousy of the mysterious "Captain" had not abated when the ladies left him to the sands and the castles he was building thereon.

Be sure he was not long in seeking his own quarters in Leyden; not much longer ere he availed himself of the elder lady's invitation, or the seconding glance in a pair of blue eyes, which had done something towards his castle-building.

It was a proud moment for him when he was admitted under the Van Sittart roof. He was aware this was an especial privilege to a young student, even had there been no charming young lady in view.

Not only did the Van Sittarts move in the best society, but the silver-haired dame was a woman of some culture; affected letters; had a near relative occupying a professorial chair in the University; and round the tea stove* in their antique drawing-room, rich in carving and old pictures, might be met not only learned professors and a sprinkling of rising students, but a select circle of other friends.

Hendrik was received with cordiality and smiles, was invited to repeat his visit, and availed himself of the privilege to the utmost.

Then Sunday by Sunday they met at church, and what more natural than the

* A china and metal contrivance, holding a small lamp, above which the teapot rests to be kept hot.

walk home beside them to their own door, even if not invited to enter? And what more natural than the pressure of little fingers when a hand was committed for a moment to his keeping as they parted there, or that the pressure should send the warm blood mantling to cheek and brow?

He had ceased to be jealous of the "Captain;" he had learned that the much-valued giver of Zeiler was the absent uncle of Luthera, who had been almost a father to her, and who was revered as such.

But he had begun to be jealous of some-one else; no less an individual than Derek Keppel, whom he found admitted to the same exclusive circle, and, as he fancied, on a more familiar footing than himself.

For himself, he felt assured he was gaining ground in the affection of Luthera, and, short of open proposal, had made his own pretensions very palpable; but more than once Derek had come in, been greeted with a kind word and a smile, or handed a cup of tea by Luthera herself, and he had

gone off in an ill-disguised fume of jealousy, leaving Derek to sip his tea and talk to the ladies or the professors, as suited him best, and to follow Luthera with his deep-set, thoughtful eyes, as he was wont to do.

There was always an excuse for his abruptness to be made by Hendrik to the aunt, and a very humble apology to be offered to the niece when next they met, indoors or out—apologies accepted more or less readily, as she thought reasonable.

But suddenly it seemed to him that though Luthera was ever glad and ready to greet him, that the Dame Van Sittart's welcome grew colder with the weather, and, as was said before, the green door opened less readily for his admittance.

He was not slow to attribute this change to the influence of Derek; and his jealous bitterness absorbed what little gratitude and sense of remorse was left to him.

The students of Leyden University are not under the same surveillance as in Oxford or Cambridge; they do not live in their college; are tied down by no strict

rules; attend the morning lectures of the professors, not on compulsion, but of free-will; and the licence they take in this and other respects is at times something appalling.

For the man of studious habits and resolute will, the path of learning is broad and open. For the indolent or irresolute, the path to ruin is still more broad and open. There is no one in authority to oppose a barrier; and young blood is the same all the world over.

It so happened that his fits of jealousy had driven Hendrik, not into the solitude of his own chambers for the studies the good Mynheer accredited him with, but into the wild circle of which Ernst Van de Venter was chief; who, though marked by their mourning rosettes as students whose college had lost a man of note, were more at home in the café or the herberg than the college; more given to cards and billiards than books, and drank more beer and schiedam than the undrinkable Dutch water would warrant.

November closed in cold and damp; but colder than the weather was the chill upon Hendrik when he missed Luthera, two Sundays consecutive, from church; and on calling at the house where he had been a welcome guest, was told, the ladies were "Gone to Amsterdam"—then were "At the Hague"—and lastly, as Christmas drew near, and the black head and beady eyes of Zeiler at a window proved the presence of his mistress, was informed by Jan first, that "Master had returned, and the ladies were engaged;" and the next day, they would "be engaged the whole of the Christmas time."

"This is Mynheer Keppel's doing," he cried in wrath, as the green door closed in his face once more; "he shall answer for it;" and away through fast-falling snow he hurried to Keppel's lodgings, losing his breath, but not his hot temper, as he mounted the many dark stairs to the small room where he felt sure to find him—for another examination was at hand.

Without the preliminary of a knock, he

burst in upon his fellow-student, and demanded—

"What have you been saying of me to — to — the Dame Van Sittart, that should cause her door to be closed against me?"

Derek looked somewhat absently up from his papers, as if clearing his mind for the reception of ideas foreign to his subject, and having given a wandering glance round his anything but luxurious chamber, where books and diagrams were the principal furniture, at length fixed his clear but somewhat sad eyes on the irate intruder, and answered calmly,—

"Nothing; I have had other subjects for conversation."

"Nothing!" echoed the other. "Do you mean to say you have said *nothing* to prejudice the old dame against me, and so clear the road to supplant *me* with Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer?"

A flush overspread the pallid face of Derek, then left it whiter than before.

He had risen : the hand he rested on the table, as if to steady himself, trembled : there was a momentary pause before he answered,—

"I have no pretentions to Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer. I can attempt to supplant nobody. The poverty which has been your scorn, would check any presumption in that quarter. I have a mother and sister to think of—if this nasty bullet in my side does not cut short my career."

Hendrik looked him steadily in the face, his passion gone.

"Derek," said he, "if this be true,—and I never knew you lie,—you are a noble fellow, and far worthier of Luthera Van der Meyer than I. I *know* you love her, and there have been times in my mad jealousy when I have thought she hesitated in her choice between us. I thought, when Jan closed the door to me just now, you must have dropped a hint of my shortcomings as a weight into the balance, and I came here to have it out."

"Nay," said Derek, more composedly; "no word of mine was needed. The Dame Van Sittart has quick eyes and ears. Your habits and associations have been openly discussed in her hearing by professors and others. You have only yourself to blame. There must be no shadow of reproach on the man who would wed Luthera Van der Meyer. Let me, as a friend, entreat you, as I did once before, to shake off Van de Venter and his set. Go at once to your studies, and work night and day to meet the coming examination. Success is the handmaid of endeavour. Let not your parents mourn the failure of their son. Pass, and you may reverse the Dame Van Sittart's opinion. And now leave me. I have not a moment to lose; and you have put all my lucid ideas to flight."

Hendrik went his way subdued. He did not see how the pale face he had left dropped into the thin hands, or the struggle that shook the slight frame, or hear the student's

earnest prayer for strength to do his duty manfully, ere he resumed his interrupted studies—studies protracted far into the night.

Hendrik's rooms were close at hand; unobserved he reached them, and sat down to his books. But Luthera's name seemed to dance over the classic page, and send his wandering thoughts astray. He leaned back in his chair to think of her, instead of his subject. Then he filled his meerschaum and made another effort.

The following morning saw him listening to a lecture from Professor Vansittart, intent as any student in the Hall. And there is no knowing what unremitting attention might not have accomplished even at the eleventh hour. But—

Quiet Leyden was alive. The snow lay thick on all things—on the trees like winter blossoms, and the frost was keen. Not only the citizens and children, but country-women and boers skated along the frozen water-ways with their eggs, poultry, or other produce to or from the market; sledges had

superseded barges and carriages, and the stream of life seemed to run faster now the watery currents were stayed.

In passing the ancient Town Hall on his way from the lecture, Hendrik beheld Luthera standing with the Burgomaster's daughter, close to the double flight of steps leading to the great door of the fine building. Jan was fastening skates upon a little pair of feet. His own and another pair lay on the snow in readiness.

Hendrik's heart gave a great bound. Here was the chance he had hoped for.

As he saluted the two jonkvrouws, Luthera's blush and smile told that to her the meeting was not unwelcome. He drew her aside, and under the impulse of the moment told what his hopes had been, and what a blank the closed door had been to him.

She listened, hesitated, said that her aunt had heard strange rumours about him. "But I do not credit them for one moment," said she. "Aunt must be de-

ceived. At all events, I will see that you are invited to our New Year's festival. If you are then in Leyden, you can see my aunt and uncle both. My answer must depend on theirs ; and on—on—your own actions."

The Burgomaster's daughter grew chilled and weary of waiting, under all her furs. He pressed the soft hand withdrawn from Luthera's muff to meet his, thanked her as impressively ; and whilst the damsels and their attendant went skating over the canal between the lines of sparkling trees, hurried back to his room, and to his books in an ecstasy of delight and anticipation.

His skates hung temptingly on the wall before him. Whenever he raised his eyes from his book, he beheld them dangling idly there. He could not resist their invitation. He threw down his books, and took the skates from the nail.

He went flying along the canal ; but he could neither overtake those he sought, nor the flying time he was losing.

But he met those he would gladly have

avoided, and they stuck to him close as leeches.

He persisted in going back to his study; but Van de Venter and the rest persisted in going with him; and once there, rummaged his cupboards for glasses, bottles, cigars, and so forth, determined to make merry at his expense, and to put a stop to his newly-born love for study.

The next morning his head ached, and study was impossible. His room was filled with stale tobacco smoke. Into the open air he went, having a sadly dissipated and dissatisfied aspect. Congratulating himself on having been seen by no one, he returned, meeting close by his door an elderly man in a sober suit of clothes, who had the air of a country schoolmaster, and who looked closely at him in passing. And it crossed his mind hazily that he had met the same old fellow on Derek's stairhead on his last visit.

It was not a lecture morning. He was glad of that. But his own conscience was lecturing him pretty soundly, as he lay

on his couch, unable to read or do anything but reproach himself.

Next morning found him in the lecture-room; but there too for a wonder was Van de Venter, who laughed at Hendrik's lament over his lost day, and insisted that it would be better not to go up for examination until the next term. It would be better than certain failure.

The upshot was, that Hendrik did not go up for examination, but Derek Keppel did—and won high honours.

It was only what might have been expected; but when Hendrik heard that Derek had gained his degree, he was stung by a sense of shameful defeat, ay, just as if he had been up and sent back by the examiners.

Yet Derek, it was reported, had overdone it, had studied too closely, and was ill. His mother and sister had come from Amsterdam to Leyden to nurse him.

Hendrik himself remained in Leyden, alike ashamed to go home, and unfitted for its quietude. He had more need to have

been ashamed of the company he kept and the way he spent his time and his father's money. At all events, he spent none of his leisure by the couch of his best adviser, or he might have learned something.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASTER AND HIS PUPIL.

IT so came about, that on Christmas Eve, which Mynheer Meulin and his good vrouw had expected he would spend with them, Hendrik, and Van de Venter, Zwart and Groen were playing billiards together in a koffy-huis, or café, which the three latter frequented.

There were a couple of billiard-tables in the long well-lighted room ; and along the walls were ranged a number of small round mahogany tables, on each of which was set, not only a case of paper spills for pipe-lighting, but a neat white porcelain spittoon

whilst long clay pipes lay in a rest close at hand.

At one of these small side-tables sat the white-headed individual Hendrik had met, and from his garb taken for a schoolmaster, a week or ten days earlier. He had a glass of beer on the table before him, a long clay pipe in his mouth, a newspaper in his hand, and seemed to be smoking and reading in perfect contentment.

His repose did not long remain unbroken.

The three students were in that state of hilarious excitement in which they were equally ripe for frolic or for mischief. Reckless Van de Venter and swaggering Zwart, having more than a spice of the latter in them, might have been imps at the elbows of Hendrik and Groen, prompting them to annoy others and provoke a quarrel.

More than one sober citizen had left the café to avoid them.

Ere long they espied the white-headed old gentleman. Then they turned on the fountains of their small wit, and cracked

jokes at the expense of the "old schoolmaster," as they dubbed him openly.

Whether he was deaf or absorbed in his paper, he took no heed. Presently, after a whisper in Hendrik's ear, a hard paper bullet, manufactured out of a spill, went flying across the billiard-table, hit the bowl of the schoolmaster's pipe, and broke it.

The "old schoolmaster," without a word or change of countenance, laid down the broken pipe-stem, stretched out his hand for a fresh pipe, filled, lit, and began to smoke and read as complacently as before.

Another paper bullet came from Hendrik's flirting thumb. Again the pipe was broken. Again a fresh one was taken, and lit for smoking as before, without a word. The "schoolmaster" resumed his reading calmly.

A third time a like missile went. "How like you that, old schoolmaster?" went with it, as a third pipe-bowl fell to the floor broken.

"I do not like it," was the quiet answer.

Van de Venter whispered to Hendrik.

The latter went blustering up to the old man, "And why don't you like it? We'll teach you, old schoolmaster, not to sit reading here all night," and the newspaper was snatched from his hand.

"I think, young gentlemen, you need someone to teach you good manners."

"Not you, old schoolmaster. We'll give you a lesson first. You'll have to fight one of us."

"I do not want to fight," said the other quietly. "Can you not leave me alone?"

"Leave you alone, after your reflection on our manners! No, schoolmaster. You will have to fight."

"I don't want to fight," was still the old gentleman's reply, the more he was urged.

At last Hendrik pushed the quiet old man's hat off his head with the billiard cue, and said, with a sneer,—

"Will you fight me now, old schoolmaster?"

A Dutchman always wears his hat in public; only the waiters run about the café

bareheaded. This insult was not to be overlooked.

"You have left me no alternative, young man."

"You can choose your own weapons *old schoolmaster*," cried Van de Venter contemptuously.

"I suppose so," said he imperturbably. "I choose pistols."

"Very well," replied Van de Venter. "Then be on the dunes at Katwyk by eight in the morning; and come prepared with a second. I shall act for my friend."

"And don't you fail to be there, old schoolmaster," Hendrik called after him as he went.

"The old schoolmaster will not fail to be there," said he calmly, looking back at Hendrik over his shoulder.

Van de Venter and Zwart had impressed on Hendrik that until he had fought a duel, he was not fit to be called a man, or to mingle with gentlemen; and that night, between the excitement of play and the

strong geneva he had taken, he was primed for anything.

His companions took care to keep up the excitement, and jest over the fright they had given the old schoolmaster; and he lay down on his pillow a fancied hero.

It was not altogether so when his noisy friends wakened him in the raw, misty chill of the early morning. He had dreamed of Christmas bells, father and mother, and of Luthera; and surely enough, there on his table before him lay the promised invitation to the Van Sittarts' New-Year festival, which must have been lying there since the previous afternoon.

As he read it, a sense of dread and wrong-doing came over him to banish his delight. How could he justify the business he was on to Luthera, if he survived—if?

There were, however, those around him who left little opportunity for reflection. A hired sledge hurried them over the eight miles of frozen snow between Leyden and Katwyk; and they smoked, sang, and jested

all the way, until he was half-ashamed of his own better thoughts.

At Katwyk the Rhine is, or was, discharged by immense sluice-gates into the —since drained—Haarlemer Meer, or sea ; and between those sluice-gates and the salt-pans in which the sea water was collected to be afterwards boiled into salt in Leyden, and under shelter of the grassy dunes or sand-hills, was the peaceful spot selected for unholy work.

I have said that Hendrik was not wholly bad, though the tempters by his side were doing their best to make him so. Not all their badinage could keep him from thinking ; and he had the grace to put up a silent prayer to be preserved from blood-guiltiness.

His comrades had made merry over the conclusion that the old schoolmaster would be afraid to meet them ; and Hendrik in his secret soul hoped they were right.

But surely enough two figures, muffled in fur-lined cloaks with high stand-up collars, were there before them. And, as if in

respectful attendance, a negro also well wrapped up from the cold stood a little apart.

The preliminaries were settled by the seconds, the pistols were loaded, the ground was measured, the cloaks were thrown aside, and then Hendrik and the other students beheld—not an old timid schoolmaster in a rusty suit, but a naval officer in full uniform, with his breast covered with medals and decorations, whom his second, also a naval officer, addressed as "*Admiral.*"

Hendrik stood aghast! He was awed by the evident rank of his self-provoked antagonist. He stepped forward, hesitated, stammered out some sort of blundering apology—"Had he known who the gentleman was, he would not have presumed to—"

"Exactly," interrupted the Admiral sternly; "you would insult a poor old schoolmaster, whose only weapon was a cane, and have been civil enough to a man of position, to whom all weapons were

familiar. You provoked the quarrel, you must bide the issue. I have a lesson to give you. Take your place."

He spoke apart to his second.

"The Admiral," said the latter, "considering the youth and inexperience of his antagonist, concedes the right to fire first."

Van de Venter, though much less assured than ordinary, accepted the favour for his principal. Hendrik, who did not want to fire at all, would have declined; indeed, he would have shrunk out of the duel altogether, had not his second taunted him with pusillanimity, and threatened to post him as a coward all over the University.

They were placed. Hendrik trembled in spite of his efforts to nerve himself. It is one thing to shoot at a senseless mark, and another to have a man for a target. The signal was given, he fired—his bullet had gone astray. There stood the Admiral, unharmed; and the novice was thankful for that.

It was the Admiral's turn to fire. All Hendrik's courage had gone. His big

frame was in a tremor, for he felt as if his doom was sealed, and home, Luthera, his hope of heaven, lost to him for ever. He saw and seemed to hear the cock of the pistol levelled against him. A world of anguish and repentance was condensed into a second.

The pistol was lowered, *un*fired.

"Take your life, young man" said the Admiral. "And now, Mungo," addressing the black servant.

An apple went up high into the air, there was a report, the Admiral's pistol was discharged, the apple came down in fragments.

"And now, young man," said he sternly, "if you have not had your lesson, let me give you one."

Another pistol was handed to him, another apple thrown, with like result.

"Now," said he again, "you see that my aim is unerring; that if I had fired, a human soul would have gone to its account with God; gone with the sin of premeditated and provoked murder fresh upon it; gone to register a deed of blood

before the throne of the Prince of Peace, whose birth we celebrate this Christmas morn. Go home, young man, to reflect on what you might have been, but for my forbearance, my respect for the Christian laws you ignore—a murderer or a corpse. Go home, and on your knees thank God for the life He has spared you for repentance and amendment. Quit your evil associates ; learn to honour grey hairs, and forget not the old schoolmaster's first lesson."

The rank of the speaker tended to impress his teaching on his hearers. Not on on all alike : Van de Venter and Zwart treated the whole affair as a good joke long before they reached Leyden ; but there Groen and Hendrik left them to go their several ways, Hendrik to his own chambers to think over what might have been, in much sobered mood.

He had an aid to reflection in the card of invitation to the New Year's Eve gathering at the Van Sittarts'. And now, instead of thinking of the offended majesty of Heaven, he began to torment himself with

fears lest a rumour of his doings should reach Luthera's ears. He knew how strong were her Christian principles, how great was her repugnance to insobriety, how deep her reverence for age, and he paced his narrow room in a fever of unrest. But he neither betook himself to schiedam nor to Van der Venter. He locked and barred his door to keep intruders out. No one came, he had his day to himself, and he spent it in thinking of the precipice on which he stood. Happily Van de Venter had thought best to quit Leyden, and he came not near. Towards the end of the week Hendrik bethought him of the sick Derek ; but he was reported better, and not in his chambers.

New Year's Eve came, the great annual festival of Holland. The streets and canals were unusually alive with people on their way to family gatherings.

The green door was once more open to Hendrik. He was ushered into the well-known drawing-room, all ablaze with light. There was a murmur of voices, a rustle of

silks in his ears, there were people around him, but his eyes were riveted upon one group near the stove, and his steps were stayed.

There stood his late antagonist, in his uniform and decorations, in conversation with Luthera and Derek, whose face, though very pale, had lost all trace of melancholy or despondence.

Luthera came forward as he advanced, half-bewildered.

"Mynheer Meulin," said she, "allow me to present you to my uncle, Admiral Van Sittart."

Hendrik's heart sank as he bowed to the man against whom his pistol had so recently been levelled.

"I think you and I have met before, Mynheer Meulin; I was an old schoolmaster then, you know, but I have been promoted, — a little more rapidly than Captain Van Sittart was promoted," he added, as a sort of parenthesis.

Hendrik wondered what was to come next. The room seemed to swim round

with him. He could scarcely master a word in reply.

Derek came up, drew his arm within his, led him to a lady in mourning on a sofa, with a pretty girl beside her; they were Derek Keppel's mother and sister. He introduced Hendrik as a *friend* and fellow-student.

"Then have you come to congratulate my son?" asked the older lady, with a smile.

"On what, madam? On his new degree?"

"Nay, did you not know? The bullet has been extracted from his side. During his hours of quiet study it had dropped or worked itself within easy reach, and as soon as the examination was over, it was removed."

"Then I have in deed reason to congratulate him."

"But that is not all!" said Jonkvrouw Keppel, with a pleasing smile. "He has received a lucrative Government appointment, and is betrothed to Jonkvrouw Van der Meyer."

"What! Derek?" exclaimed he, scarcely able to contain himself, "Derek? Where is the treacherous—" he looked as if for a foe, his nostrils dilating; he confronted only the Admiral.

"Young sir," said he, laying his hand on Hendrik's sleeve and drawing him aside to a recess, "have you so soon forgotten the schoolmaster's first lesson? We can have no heroics here? Be brave enough to take your second lesson like a man. You have only yourself to blame. Do you remember rushing from this house to accuse Mynheer Keppel of supplanting you, and the good advice he gave on that occasion. Your impetuosity had left an open door behind you. That conversation was overheard and reported by the old schoolmaster. It was a revelation, not only to myself and sister, but to Luthera. It opened the girl's eyes in more ways than one. She had known Derek all her life; and loved him unawares, until *you* came with your handsome face and plausible tongue to mislead and bewilder her. I came

home only just in time to prevent a grievous blunder. She had mistaken Derek's honourable silence for indifference, and she equally mistook your passion for love!"

"*Mistook* it!" repeated Hendrick bitterly.

"Yes, mistook it!" said the Admiral emphatically. "It is a mistake to call that emotion love which does not rouse all a man's better nature within him; and in all things you were 'unstable as water.' My sister gave me an inkling of your pretensions to our niece. I happen to know your worthy father. It behoved me to learn what manner of man was his son, and if rumour lied. It was not by chance I took my seat in the café. The guardians of a young girl had need be wise and wary. Would you hear from Luthera's own lips what influenced her decision?"

"Nay, nay," groaned Hendrik, "I have heard enough."

"Not unless you have heard enough to change the course of your life, and set you on a new path in the New Year. Idle

habits and sinful associates lead to the gulf of destruction. Shun them, work hard, and pray hard to be delivered from temptation, and in time to come you will thank the 'old schoolmaster' for both his lessons."

. . . . . .

And years afterwards, when Derek Keppel was the proud husband of Luthera, and all Holland recognised his skill as an engineer, Hendrik, who was about to marry Derek's pretty sister, the one who had first made known to him Derek's betrothal, did acknowledge with thanks the much-needed lessons of the "Old Schoolmaster," hard as they had been at the time. He had fought a duel with *himself*, and had come off victor; but his weapon was the sword of the Spirit, and his shield, God's Word.

CHURCH BELLS.

AS I do not tell this story either to advertise myself or my trade, I need simply premise that I have an old establishment in the boot and shoe line in the neighbourhood of Shudehill, Manchester, and that business connected therewith carried me, at the close of the year 185—, to the quaint old Cheshire town Sandbach, well known throughout the trade for the production of heavy articles in the way of hob-nailed clodhopping foot-gear, and their

antitheses, dainty and bright-coloured slipperkins for the tiniest infantile toes.

I never throw away either time or money without some show of reason, so I took the parliamentary train from London Road Station, as being at once early and cheap.

There had been a heavy fall of snow two days before, but a sharp frost had set in, and the wind was keen and biting. The steam of our breaths condensed on the cold windows of the carriage, and ran down the glass in fanciful and intricate runnels.

All the passengers who had the wherewithal were wrapped and muffled to the chin, and we had not long crossed the Stockport Viaduct before there was an unmistakable odour of brandy in the compartment.

It was cold, and no mistake, and I shivered under all my wraps ; but there was a hardy sailor opposite to me, with collar loose and bosom all exposed, as if it had been midsummer instead of mid-

winter. He had a P.-jacket on, but it was all open and unbuttoned. The sight of his bare breast almost set my teeth chattering, and I told him so.

"Lord bless you, sir," said he, "I'm used to it; an' as for cold, why, a chap as has been knocking about the seas for years in a Greenland whaler isn't afraid of an icicle. Cold! Why, you don't know what cold is in these latitudes! If you felt the ribs of your ship crushing between icebergs, and had to slide down frozen lines that cut like knives, and could not touch an iron bolt or marlin-spike but you left your skin upon it, then you *might* call it cold; but here, Lord love you!" and he shook his head as if commiserating at once my ignorance and effeminacy.

"I never kept company with polar bears," was my retort, "and don't need to carry a thermometer to the arctic circle so long as I see a little creature like that shivering in *these latitudes*," and I nodded towards the opposite corner, where sat a patient-looking little girl, some ten or

eleven years old, whose clothes bore no proportion to the weather.

He leaned forward; she being small, and on the same side with himself, he had not seen her before. It was quite evident she was travelling by herself. It was not the work of a minute for him to strip off his P.-jacket.

"Here, my lass; Jack Frost won't bite thee through that. I say, ma'am, just help the little wench to wrap it round her." This to a stiff matron, who looked unutterable daggers at him for the crushing sustained in his kindly attempt to reach the "little wench" beyond her, but she never removed her insensate fingers from her sable muff.

More womanly hands, however, from the opposite seat tucked the woolly garment round the mite of a traveller, and made me somewhat ashamed of my own lukewarmness in remedying the evil I had been so ready to perceive.

The young lady—she was not more than three-and-twenty—produced a bun

from a reticule, and, after some hesitation, "the little wench" put forth a gloveless purpled hand, and took it.

The pleasant-faced sailor leaned forward.

"I say, little lass, where do you hail from? I seem to have known a face some time uncommon like yours; what d'they call thee?"

"Fanny Watson, sir," murmured she in a voice half-choked with bun.

"H'm," he muttered, with his chin in his hand, in self-communing, "don't remember anyone of that name. And what brings you travelling all alone, Fanny?" he asked, after a pause.

The bun went down from the lips, and the little eyes filled with tears.

"I'm going to see my mother, sir, and granny could not come with me."

She was not shy, neither was she communicative, yet one query or another from all three of us elicited that she lived in Tib Street, Manchester, with her father's mother; that her granny had had a letter more than a week before, to say that her

own mother, whom she had not seen for a year, was very ill, and wanted to see her, and that she had not been able to go before, because "granny could not spare the money."

"And where does your mother live, my dear?" put in the young lady kindly.

"In Sandbach, ma'am—in Union Street."

"Sandbach, eh!" exclaimed the sailor and myself in a breath; but he added, "your granny might have sent you by Foden, the carrier, he wouldn't ha' charged much for a morsel like you."

Here I struck in,—"Foden, the carrier, has been dead some years, my man; I believe he was killed on the road."

This changed the current of the conversation, and it turned out that the warm-hearted sailor, whose name was Ben Brearton, was a native of Sandbach, returning thither after an absence of twelve years.

By this time we had reached Crewe, not then the imposing station it is now.

Myself and carpet-bag having got out of the way, Ben Brearton lifted out the

bundled-up little Fanny, jacket and all, and placed her on the platform.

We had the 'bus all to ourselves, and a pleasant quartette we made, the sailor and the little girl lapsing into occasional fits of reverie.

At Wheelock Bridge a lady and a servant were in waiting for Miss Birch. I had helped her to alight, and she had shaken hands with me at parting, and had, moreover, admitted that she had come to spend Christmas at the house of a friend, who was manager of the saltworks, though her own home was in Manchester.

As the 'bus went on, the sailor gave vent to frequent ejaculations. "Ah! there's the old well, and plenty of hips, no doubt, on the ragged hedge above it, where the dog-roses used to blow;" and, as we passed a deserted red-brick mansion, elevated above the roadside, "And there's the haunted house, empty to this day!" and so on, as one thing after another awoke recollections either from a change or no change.

As we neared Sandbach (it is but a mile from Wheelock), clear and distinct through the frosty air came the sound of church bells.

It was but a preliminary note; but the bluff, clear-eyed, open-breasted sailor started as if he had been shot.

"The old church bells! Ah! the last time I heard them!" he exclaimed, as if to himself; and an expression of mute agony swept over his open countenance, and stood out in every muscle of his sinewy hands as he clasped them tightly together on his knees; and the same deep anguish bowed his head, and set his strong white teeth together.

"Ah! when I heard them last!" he repeated, under his breath.

I did not like to intrude on his privacy; but the little girl looked up at him wistfully, and laid her small hand gently on his, as I counted the strokes of the bell one by one.

"It's the death-bell," said she, in a sort of apprehensive whisper. "Do you think—"

I had incautiously counted aloud,—"Thirty-seven, and a woman!"

"Thirty-seven! Oh! my mother's thirty-seven. Do you think—" and her white face grew whiter.

"And I'm thirty-seven, my little lass; and I wouldn't mind if them bells was tolling for me this minute. They rang a wedding-peal when I heard them last," said the sailor, stroking her head caressingly. "Cheer up, little one; there are more people thirty-seven than your mother and me. Don't let the bell frighten you because it tolls. Them Sandbach bells rang worse than a death-knell to me in their merriest peal twelve years ago, just in the harvest-time. And now, as I come back to the old place once more, I am welcomed by the toll of a death-bell indeed! Who's gone now?"

We had reached the "Wheatsheaf," where I proposed to put up.

"Oh! I should have got out at the Top-o'-th'-town," cried Fanny. "We

have passed Union Street, and I've got this big bundle."

Ben Brearton smiled at her estimate of size, took the bundle, tied in a blue check handkerchief, in one hand, threw his P.-jacket to an ostler, and said,—

"I'll see you home, little one; but you'd best stay and have some warm breakfast first."

No, no! there was no staying for the little one with that church-bell tolling in her ears. The hammer struck as hard on her heart as on the bell.

As they went up the town, I noticed how thin and patched were the boots on the young feet, hurrying so anxiously over the frozen snow, and a sort of wish rose to my mind that I had measured her for a new pair for a Christmas box.

I had ordered breakfast—the hurried mouthful taken in the early morning counted for nothing — and sat warming my own benumbed toes at a blazing fire, in a room adorned with black-framed portraits of racing celebrities, and a case

or two of stuffed perch and bream, waiting for the comestibles, when back came Ben Brearton, and staggered rather than walked to the nearest seat. It happened to be a huge chintz-covered sofa, and on one of its arms down went his arm and head, and never lifted, though the pretty waitress came in and out many times, and even intimated—"Breakfast ready, sir."

"You seem to have had a shock, my friend," said I, at length, the bell tolling solemnly all the time.

"Well, Mr Hopwood, if you care to listen, I'll tell you why the sound of them bells, that used to ring me to church so cheerily every Sunday, seems to drive the very blood from my heart now."

I made a motion of assent, and he went on.

"My father was a master shoemaker, and kept five or six pair of hands at the lapstone. We lived at the pretty low cottage at the far side of the common, with the fruit-garden stretching a goodish bit down the lane, right opposite to Squire

Wilson's. He bound me 'prentice to his foreman, and I handled awl and 'taching-end till I was twenty-one.

"But long years before that I had given my heart away to Ruth Farringdon, the sweetest and prettiest lass in all Sandbach.

"Her father was a well-to-do provision dealer in the market-place, wore a broad-brimmed hat, and a drab coat an' gaiters, and was as dusty with flour as Hopper the miller.

"Many a time I tremble now when I think of the dangers into which I led my little playmate. You see, she was four years younger than me, and was quite a little one when she first sat on a form in Miss Lawton's school-room, where, at a side table, the clerk himself taught me and one or two other lads to read, and write, and cypher.

"One door of the school-room opened on the churchyard, the other on the waste ground, on the far side of which was the back gate of Farringdon the baker.

"Being reckoned a steady lad, I was

trusted to take the little lass home now and again; but there were baulks of timber, and planks, and kid-stacks * on the ground, and many a game of tick, or hide-and-seek, we have had amongst them before we reached the bakehouse.

"One day—I remember it as if it were last week—we were breaking up for the midsummer holidays, and each of the children took a shilling to Miss Lawton, to help to make up a feast. It was a gala day, and the clerk had thrown open the little side gate into the churchyard, and girls and boys together ran wild amongst the old gravestones. Then he opened the belfry door, and, for a treat, let the bigger children up to the top of the tower, to look through a telescope of his.

"Sure enough little Ruth Farringdon crept up behind me, and—I grow sick now when I think of it—leaned over one of the embrasures of the parapet, and, growing giddy, lost her balance. Tom

* Stacks of firewood.

Arden and I caught hold of her skirts just in time to save her as she was going over; and I never shall forget the fright I had that day!

"From that time out Tom and I did little but fight over Ruth Farringdon, and, as he was both older and bigger, he often got the best of it. Then his father was a builder, and had a large house (the old red-brick one at the end of the market-place, just above Swan Bank), and he was given to crow over me on that account too.

"But little Ruth stuck by me, in spite of his father's big house, and his boast that he had saved her life; and I know she thought more of the two or three cherries or strawberries I bought on Thursdays with my market-penny, and put in her lap as she sat on the steps of the old market cross, than all the papers of gingerbread he bought her at Mrs Norbury's.

"About the time I was set to work, old Farringdon removed Ruth from Miss Lawton's school to a better one, kept by

two old maids named Moss, in a big house, right facing Arden's ; and whenever Tom *could* shirk his work, down would go plane or saw, and he be waiting by Moss's broad steps, to carry her book-bag and slate for her ; you see, she was getting a biggish girl then.

"But that did not last long. Old Farringdon bound Ruth 'prentice to Mrs Norbury, to learn dressmaking. You see, she was a dressmaker as well as a confectioner, and worked for all the gentry around Sandbach, having a lot of lasses in her work-room. And there it was Ruth came across Letty Ormerod, another 'prentice, the daughter of Lord Crewe's farm bailiff.

"She was a fine, handsome lass was Letty, with hair and eyes as black as an Esquimaux's ; and somehow Ruth and her became friends in no time, and there was no chance of seeing one without the other ; but she was always very well disposed towards me, was Letty, and when they went for a walk together, on holiday after-

noons, managed to drop a hint whether they were going up the hill past Twemlow's, or down the Lovers' Walk to Jacob's Well, or along Braddah * Lane, or o'er the common; and so we were sure to meet, and many a happy afternoon we three have spent in the fields or lanes together, and many's the bunch of dog-roses, or nuts, or blackberries I've pulled down for them. But though I always gave the best of flowers or fruit to dear, shy little Ruth, I think I laughed and talked freest with Letty.

"One of those afternoons we had gone over the bridge, and along the brook, and through the little gate by Percival's mill, where the meadow rises like a steep bank, and we sat down in the sunshine on the soft grass, Ruth and Letty on each side of me, to look at the shining water, and listen to the song of a green linnet. I plaited a basket for Ruth with the rushes we had gathered by the brook side, my heart full

* Bradwell.

to overflowing with the silent joy of her presence, when a step and a voice caused me to look up. Tom Arden stood between me and the sunshine.

"'Oh, this is the way you spend your holidays, is it? Suppose I join you. You know, the more the merrier;' and I thought he cast a glance at Letty Ormerod.

"I saw the colour mount to Ruth's forehead, and I know my own face crimsoned as he threw his long body down beside her on the grass, and began to peel and strip the rushes I wanted to use, and then laughingly held her hands in his, to prevent her taking the basket I had made.

"It was play, but the play had a meaning in it, as I found to my sorrow.

"When we rose to go, he pulled Ruth's arm within his own, and, without rudeness to Letty, I could make no remonstrance; indeed, I seemed tongue-tied after he joined us.

"From that day forth, whichever way we went, he was sure to meet us; and all the while, though my love grew strong and

fierce as a flame within me, I never had a chance to give it utterance in word; yet I felt that Ruth loved me, and I knew I worshipped the very ground she trod upon.

"Ay, Mr Hopwood, I have gathered the very grass she *had* trod upon, and it has gone with me half over the world.

"But I am keeping you from your business, sir. I must cut my yarn shorter.

"I was not much more nor twenty when mother died, and then troubles came thick and fast, for father never did a bit of good afterwards.

"Mother had been buried about six months, when one Thursday afternoon, as I was reaching a last from the rack, I happened to glance through the transom window, and who should I see but my darling Ruth at Squire Wilson's gate, carrying a dress home for Mrs Wilson—at least she had a large soft parcel with her.

"You may be sure I did not sit down with the last on my lap. Down it went,

and hammer and stirrup with it, and I bolted out of the workshop, and through the house-place, in a hurry to reach our little wooden garden-gate.

"The bright scarlet cloak and modest black beaver bonnet had disappeared when I got there; but I waited, and in about half-an-hour Ruth stepped out and cast a sidelong glance at our cottage, and, of course, saw me looking for her.

"The roads were muddy, and she wore pattens; and just as she caught my eye she either trod in a deep rut or on a stone, but her patten twisted, and she slipped.

"I caught her as she was falling, and caught her grateful look too. Her ankle was wrenched, so I took her in my arms, for the first time since she was a little one, and carried her, with a beating heart, to mother's low rocking-chair by our warm fireside, and called old Betty to bathe her ankle, whilst I mended the broken strap of the patten which had done all the mischief.

"I daresay I left my dirty finger-marks

on her dainty cloak as I unfastened the clasp at the throat, and gave it to Betty to dry for brushing, and I fumbled clumsily enough at the bonnet strings in untying them, but she said never a word, and, when the bonnet was off, her head sank on my shoulder in a sort of faint.

"My father was out, and the men came crowding round, but I sent them back to their benches, and made old Betty close the workshop door; and by-and-by Ruth came round, but still I kept possession of her and her lissom waist, and when her dear eyes looked up into mine I saw they drooped again, and the head I drew back to my shoulder made no effort to withdraw.

"Old Betty was too busy bathing the sprained ankle to see anything of this, or of the kiss I ventured to drop on the tempting forehead, bringing the warm blood to answer with a flush.

"Soon Betty proposed a cup of tea, and hobbled into the back kitchen to mix batter for wheat-cakes, and then all the love, kept back so long, came rushing from

my lips with the strength of a spring-tide.

"It was a glorious opportunity, and I made the most of it.

"Dear Ruth (she was not seventeen) panted and trembled, but she whispered, 'Oh Ben!' and hid her face in my breast, (though I had only my working clothes on) and those two words told me all I had been longing to know.

"But the loving answer her warm lips made to mine was better than a whole dictionary of words. Many a time since then have I lain awake in my berth, and heard that happy, soft 'Oh, Ben!' above the wash of the waves, and felt those kisses again on my lips, till the very pain has stung me.

"Well, I mended her patten-strap, and after dark me and Bill Wright carried her home in mother's chair, for she could not walk, and old Farringdon thanked us both.

"Of course I called to see how Ruth's ankle got on, glad to have a footing in the house; and at first old Farringdon was

very cordial. But soon, and as I thought all of a sudden, he turned crusty as one of his own loaves; and not a sight could I get of Ruth. But Letty was very kind, and many a message she carried from one to the other, and she never seemed tired of hearing me talk of Ruth. She was like a sister to me was Letty. She it was who planned for Ruth and me to meet by Farringdon's kid-stack on the waste ground, as she went home from work at night, and offered to keep watch for us when she could.

"But old Farringdon caught us the very second time we met, and he hauled Ruth away, calling me all the sneaks and rascals he could lay his tongue to.

"It was no manner of use my going to him the next day and asking his leave to come courting to Ruth openly. He would not hear a word; said I was but a 'prentice-lad, and not able to keep a wife if I had one, and though I was nigh out of my time, he was not going to let his Ruth have her heart broken by a fellow with so many strings to his bow.

"Not a word of explanation would he give me, but he took Ruth away from Mrs Norbury's, and kept a strict watch over her after that, and if it had not been for Letty, I think I should have gone out of my mind.

"Well, the upshot was, that when my time was up, I set off to London, to try and better myself, old Farringdon having come round to say that if I came back at the end of three years with a good character and a bit of money saved he would help me with some more to start in business for myself, and I should have Ruth, if she were in the same mind.

"He would not let me see my darling to say good-bye, but I caught sight of her at her bedroom window, sobbing as if her very heart would break, and she kissed her little hand to me over and over again.

"It was Christmas time, as it might be now, sir, and I left with Letty a pair of Adelaide boots, which I had made for Ruth, as a Christmas box. I had taken the measure of her shoe that happy after-

noon when it was off in my father's house-place. Letty promised to give Ruth the boots (I had put a letter inside one), and all my promises of love and constancy. I kissed the friendly lass, whose black eyes were brimming with tears, thanked her for her kind heart, and was gone.

"I was a good workman, and got a good place in London, and by working early and late, and living carefully, saved money, and every shilling I put by I felt brought me nearer to Ruth.

"Postage was dear in those days, but every now and then I sent a letter to Letty Ormerod holding another for Ruth, and now and then I got one back from Letty, but never a one from Ruth herself. Letty said she was not allowed to write.

"Letty was not much of a scholar, and her letters, somehow, were not very satisfactory, and at times I fancied said more of herself than my Ruth; but that might have been a love-sick fancy.

"But I grew anxious, and before the three years were up went back to Sand-

bach, with money in my pocket and hope and love in my heart.

"As the coach stopped at the 'George' the old church bells began to clash a wedding peal, and I thought to myself, 'Ah, they'll ring for Ruth and me next!'

"I got down from the top of the coach just as the wedding party came up the road; and oh! that I live to tell it!—came face to face with the bride and bridegroom —Ruth and Tom Arden.

"I heard a woman's scream and nothing more. When I came to myself, they said I had had a fit of some kind.

"The coach was just ready for starting, and I re-mounted to the seat I had just quitted so joyously, a moody, miserable, heart-broken wretch, silent as grim death. And the wedding-bells were pealing all the time, and rang merrily as I turned my back on hope and home for ever. It was as a death bell to me!

"That is more than twelve years ago, sir," concluded he, "and I come back

now just to see the old place once again before I die, and I go off to sea again first thing in the new year. There is nothing to keep me ashore now.

"You heard, sir, how the death-bell welcomed Ben Brearton back *this* time. The only friend I looked to find is carried off!

"I did think to go back to Liverpool to-night, but I must stay and see Letty put decently in the ground, and do some thing to make that poor little lass of hers comfortable. I've more money than I know what to do with, and I hear that Letty's husband deserted her seven years since."

I wrung the sailor's hand earnestly, for his story had affected me deeply, and then left the inn in a hurry to transact the business his narrative had delayed.

I bent my steps first towards the dip of the road from the High Street, where Morris, a manufacturer of children's shoes, had his premises, close by the brook.

I was there some time—an hour or more. Returning, I struck across the market-place,

on my way to a heavy-shoemaker's on the common. Standing with his arms folded, I saw Ben Brearton leaning against one of the obelisks of the ancient cross, and gazing fixedly on the house which I recognised as having been Farringdon's.

He did not see me, and I passed on, but barely had I reached the large house he had named as Arden's, when I saw a respectable woman, without shawl or bonnet, rushing as if she were mad up Swan Bank, with curls and cap-strings flying loose, regardless of frost or gazing gossips. I made way for her to pass. Her eyes roved from side to side, as if looking wildly for someone. One glance was enough: she flew rather than ran towards the cross, and throwing her arms round the startled sailor, cried "Ben, Ben,—dear Ben! forgive me! we were both deceived!"

Letty Watson's death-bed had witnessed a confession. She had played a double part throughout, hoping by the interest she showed in him to win Ben Brearton over to herself in time. It was she who

gave Tom Arden the hint where to find them on their Sunday rambles; she who had poisoned the old man's mind against the young shoemaker, telling him that Ben was playing a double game with Ruth and herself. She had shown Ben's letters addressed to herself—at first warily—then kept back those addressed to Ruth, until the poor girl, convinced of her lover's perfidy, yielded to Tom Arden's pertinacity and her old father's entreaties.

Ben's unexpected appearance on her wedding-morn, and the fit he had had in the street, opened her eyes somewhat; but not until the week before she died had Letty revealed her own baseness, and Ben's devotion. And then she produced the Adelaide boots—much too small for her own wear—which she had kept back likewise. In the toe of the left boot Ruth found Ben's letter, yellow with age, which must have escaped the other's notice.

Ruth Arden had been a widow ten years, her husband and his father having

both been killed by the fall of a scaffolding. After their death she had gone back to her father's house, and when he too died she had taken the empty cottage into which she had been carried with a sprained ankle, and where Ben had first told his love.

It was there I heard these particulars. I had seen Ben's white-faced, staggering amazement, and the straining clasp which followed Ruth's passionate appeal in the open market-place, and, not liking to intrude, had walked on. My business lay close by the cottage. They, flushed with excitement and happiness, overtook me.

Mrs Arden, a pretty woman, about thirty-two, seemed half-ashamed of the public display she had made.

"I could not help it, sir," said she; "a neighbour told me that Ben had come back, and was going away at once, and I was too feared of losing him again to think of other folk."

Ben Brearton was very bitter against the treacherous woman who had marred the best years of Ruth's life and his

own. But I think he cast his wrath and bitterness into Letty Watson's grave, and buried them with her.

At all events, when the old Sandbach church bells rang their wedding peal for Ben Brearton and Ruth in Christmas week, little Fanny Watson was established at the cottage and well cared for.

"The little lass has no right to suffer for the sins of her mother; and if we cannot forgive at Christmas time, and when we are happy ourselves try to make others happy, we have no right to call ourselves Christians," said Ben, as he seated the child beside him at the table to partake of the wedding feast.

And I echoed the sentiment, being a guest, and so did the young lady on my right hand, Miss Birch, whose acquaintance I had considerably improved at Wheelock, and who has now been Mrs Hopwood more years than I care to count.

THE END.

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